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Collectible AUTOMOBILE®

Hey, Sport: 1955 'Vette, 'Bird, Jag

Tempest-Tossed: 1964-67 Pontiac Mid-Sizers

Packard's Postwar "Dream Cars"

- Charge Account: Renewing the Electric Car
- Profile: Ford Design Chief Gene Bordinat

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Jaguar XK140 Convertible Coupe

dard) or three-speed Fordomatic self-shifter. Output was rated at 193 bhp with the manual gearbox, 198 with the automatic. At slightly less than 3000 pounds, it was some 330 pounds heavier than the 'Vette, but performance proved satisfying to the thousands who signed contracts.

Ford and its ad agency—J. Walter Thompson—worked long and hard on a name for the new two-seater, considering and rejecting gems like Hep Cat, Roadocrat, Wombat, Fordster, and Wheelaway. The winner came from within Ford, suggested by Alden Giberson, a junior member of the styling department. Giberson's inspiration came from Southwest native-American lore, wherein the beat of the thunderbird's wings provoked thunder and rain, a dramatic (albeit invisible) spirit that helped make life possible in an arid region.

A nonrunning T-Bird mock-up was presented at the Detroit Auto Show in February 1954, where it played to enthusiastic reviews. The production version rolled into showrooms that fall.

Was it really a sports car? Briefly. Ford's early promotional material for the Thunderbird called it "a new kind of sports car." By the time the T-Bird reached production, however, Ford had changed its tune, referring to the new two-seater as a "personal car."

Recording a 0-to-60 time of 9.5 seconds with an automatic transmission, *Road & Track*'s March 1955 test called Ford's avoidance of the sports car label "overly cautious," characterizing the T-Bird as "a touring-sports car, designed to give sports car qualities up to a point." The review went on to call the Thunderbird "an extremely practical machine for personal transport over any distance in any kind of weather."

The "personal" appellation seemed to play well in the market, as did the car's good looks, smooth power, and civilizing elements. While GM pondered whether the new V-8 could save the Corvette, 16,155 first-year Thunderbirds rolled out of the Dearborn factory.

Jaguar XK140

While Ford and Chevrolet where newcomers to the sports car game, the Jaguar name had become established prior to World War II. Manufacturer Jaguar Cars Limited emerged as a pacesetter with the dramatic introduction of the XK120 roadster at the 1948 British International Motor Show. It was the country's first big show after the war, and Jaguar's new roadster was the star with a look that would endure to the introduction of the equally stunning E-Type in 1961. Just as important, the new car established a new engine—the famous dohc inline six—that would propel Jaguars for decades.

In the Fifties, Jaguar fortified its preeminence among British sports car makers. The marque scored victories in the Le Mans 24-hour races of 1951 and '53, and 1955 would see the first of three straight wins in the round-the-clock classic.

The new Jaguar was fast, capable, and an immediate hit with sports car aficionados. The XK120 designation told the world that it was capable of 120 mph, a heady velocity for the day (some contemporary road testers were able to make it go even faster), and Jags quickly began showing up at various sports car competitions, up to and including circuit racing.

For all its credibility as a sporting

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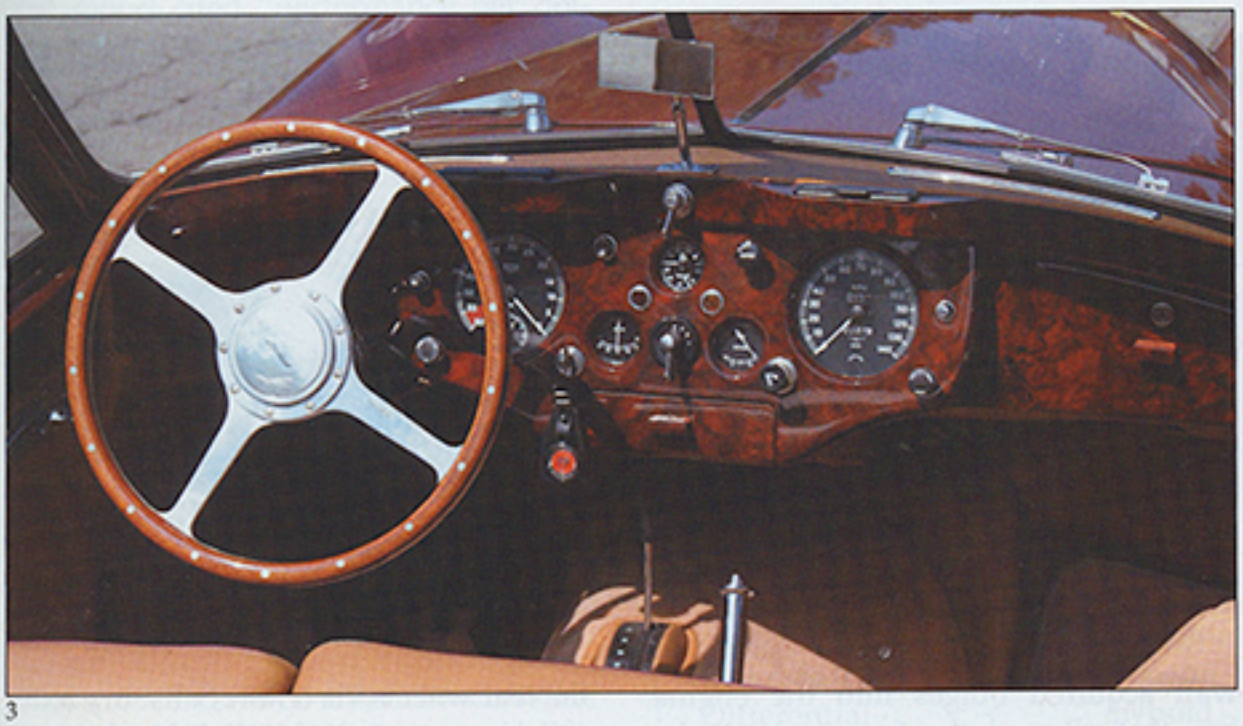

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1. Britain's Jaguar upgraded its established XK120 into the XK140 in time for the 1955 model year. Outward signs of change were a wider grille with thicker teeth, a chrome hood molding, and stouter bumpers. *2-4.* Inside the convertible (this is a little-changed 1956 model), passengers were afforded more room thanks to a repositioned firewall. (Owner: Gus Lugwig)

machine, it could also be difficult to live with in ordinary driving. The 3.4-liter six was prone to overheating in summer weather, there were quality problems (timing chain, clutch, water pump, rear springs, cracked steel wheels, hoods that occasionally popped open at speed). Plus, there were comfort issues: The cockpit was cramped; the narrow footwells could become miniature ovens; the roadster's soft top was a sketchy affair maddeningly difficult to erect (as distinct from the convertible's folding top); the side curtains offered only marginal weather protection; turn signals were conspicuous by their absence; and there was no heater, defroster, radio, or power steering.

Jaguar made a number of running changes to the XK120 over its six-year production run, addressing at least some of these issues. However, it was the XK140 that represented a real step forward in terms of marrying sports car virtues with advances in contemporary comfort.

The 140 made its debut in 1954—essentially as a '55 model—looking very much like the 120 at a glance, and even on closer inspection. The grille was wider, with heftier teeth—and fewer of them. A chrome strip bisected the hood, resuming on the trunklid, which wore a badge commemorating the Le Mans victories. The bumpers were more substantial, if not as attractive.

The really telling changes weren't so readily visible. Although chassis and body dimensions were basically the same, the rear bulkhead was shifted aft, making room for the option of plus-two occasional seating or stowage of a convertible top, take your pick. There was an additional inch of leg and knee room, achieved by

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1, 2. Alone among the Corvette/Thunderbird/XK140 triumvirate, the Jaguar offered a choice of body styles. The coupe—this an example from 1957—was reshaped enough to almost contain four adults. *3.* What really made this cat purr was a 3.4-liter dohc six, tweaked to 190 bhp. (Owner: Gus Lugwig)

raising the body on its mounting points and moving the firewall forward by three inches, an adjustment made possible when the engine and transmission were relocated by the same amount.

Alterations to the coupe were even more extensive. (Of the three cars studied here, only the XK came in a choice of body styles.) The instrument panel and windshield were shifted forward by three inches, and the relocated firewall acquired bulges into the engine bay that allowed the front seats to be anchored further toward the front. The rear window was moved back seven inches, and the sum of these changes was an aft cabin that was almost habitable by adults. Meanwhile, the coupe's doors were lengthened by 5.5 inches, and the arch of the roof gained an inch, creating more head room and improving ingress-egress, particularly for those sentenced to time in the rear jump seats.

Mechanical updates also abounded. Rack-and-pinion steering replaced the 120's recirculating-ball system, a close-ratio four-speed transmission with a taller first gear supplanted the previous box, a Laycock overdrive unit joined the option list, and power found its way to the rear wheels via a new Salisbury axle.

Spring rates went up slightly, telescopic shocks were mounted at the rear, and front and rear tracks were each increased by a half inch. Unfortunately, the 120's drum brakes carried over, despite Jaguar's success with discs on the C-Type cars that prevailed at Le Mans. However, high-performance linings were available.

Aside from some bottom-end upgrades (steel bearing caps, stamped-steel oil sump), basic specifications of the straight six were unchanged, but the Jaguar powertrain engineers mined more horsepower from it with high-lift cams, 8.0:1 compression, and a pair of SU carburetors. Output was rated 190 horsepower at 5500 rpm and 210 pound-feet of torque at 2500.

Jaguar also offered a new "C" package ($295), with the cylinder head from the racing C-Type that featured bigger exhaust valves, enlarged ports, and a port-matched exhaust manifold. This, plus dual exhausts, raised output to 210 bhp at 5750.

So equipped, Jaguar vindicated the 140 designation in May 1953 with a timed run of 141.8 mph at a track in Belgium. However, the car was stripped of all nonessentials, and contemporary road testers rarely achieved more than 120 mph.

Also impressive was the fact that even with all the changes, Jaguar was able to whittle as much as $800 off the price.

Road & Track tested an XK140 roadster with the go-faster mods ($3745 as tested) for its June 1955 issue. The test crew recorded a 0-to-60-mph time of 8.4 seconds, very quick for the day, and a saw a best run of slightly more than 121 mph in top-speed testing.

How does the Jag stack up in this sports car trifecta? Top drawer. The *R&T* test report cited "performance per dollar excelled by no other car" and lauded the roadster's fit and finish quality. The conclusion: "[T]he 'standard of the world' has been, and still is, the Jaguar—in the sports car category." CA

Find Out More

To read more about the topics mentioned in this story, please see these issues of Collectible Automobile®: *September 1984 (Jaguar XK120/XK140), June 1987 (1955 Ford Thunderbird), August 1987 (Triumph TR2), April 1989 (1955 Ford), February 1990 (1954 Ford), June 1990 (1961 Jaguar E-Type), June 1991 (1956-57 Chevrolet Corvette), June 1992 (1954 Mercury), October 1993 (1952 Lincoln), December 1995 (Franklin Hershey), August 1998 (1953-55 Chevrolet Corvette), February 2002 (1922-40 Jaguar and SS), February 2003 (General Motors LeSabre), April 2003 (Willys Jeepster), December 2005 and February 2006 (Harley Earl), April 2007 (Austin-Healey 100), June 2007 (Ed Cole), April 2008 (MG TD), April 2010 (Buick XP-300), April 2012 (General Motors Motorama).*

Clubs for 1955 Chevrolet Corvette, Ford Thunderbird, and Jaguar XK140 Enthusiasts

National Corvette Owners Association
900 S. Washington St. G-13
Falls Church, VA 22046
Website: www.ncoa-vettes.com

National Corvette Restorers Society
6291 Day Road
Cincinnati, OH 45252-1334
Telephone: (513) 385-8526
Website: www.ncrs.org

International Thunderbird Club
P.O. Box 24041
Pepper Pike, OH 44124-9998
Telephone: (216) 514-1735
Website: www.intl-tbirdclub.com

Vintage Thunderbird Club International
P.O. Box 75308
Wichita, KS 67275
Website: www.vintagethunderbirdclub.org

Jaguar Clubs of North America
c/o Deanie Kennedy
8137 Zang St.
Arvada, CO 80005
Telephone: (888) 258-2524
Website: www.jcna.com

1955 Chevrolet Corvette, Ford Thunderbird, and Jaguar XK140 Specifications

	Corvette	Thunderbird	XK140
Wheelbase (ins.)	102.0	102.0	102.0
Overall length (ins.)	167.0	175.3	176.0
Width (ins.)	70.0	70.2	64.5
Tread, front/rear (ins.)	57.0/58.8	56.0/56.0	51.5/50.5
Fuel tank (gal)	17.0	17.5	16.8
Construction type	body-on-frame	body-on-frame	body-on-frame
Body material	fiberglass	steel	steel
Engine type	V-8[1]	V-8	I-6
Valves	ohv[1]	ohv	dohc
Displacement (cid)	265[1]	292	210
Horsepower @ rpm[2]	195 @ 5000[1]	193 @ 4400	190 @ 5500
Torque (lb-ft) @ rpm[2]	260 @ 3000[1]	280 @ 2500	210 @ 2500
Compression ratio	8.0:1[1]	8.1:1[3]	8.0:1
Main bearings	5[1]	5	7
Carburetion	4-bbl[1]	4-bbl	2×1-bbl
Electrical system	12-volt[1]	6-volt	12-volt
Transmission type[4]	2-sp automatic	3-sp manual	4-sp manual
Driveshaft	open	open	open
Differential	hypoid	hypoid	hypoid
Axle ratio[5]	3.55:1	3.73:1	3.54:1
Suspension, front	independent	independent	independent
Springs, front	coil	coil	torsion bars
Suspension, rear	solid axle	solid axle	solid axle
Springs, rear	semielliptic leaf	semielliptic leaf	semielliptic leaf
Steering type	worm/sector	worm/roller	rack/pinion
Brake type, front/rear	drum/drum	drum/drum	drum/drum
Tire size	6.70×15	6.70×15	6.00×16

[1]Six cars were built with an inline ohv six-cylinder engine of 235.5 cid, 155 bhp at 4200 rpm, and 225 pound-feet of torque at 2800 rpm. Compression ratio was 8.0:1, there were four main bearings, and three one-barrel carburetors were used. Ignition was six-volt. [2]Standard. With optional automatic transmission, Thunderbird made 198 bhp at 4400 rpm and 286 pound-feet at 2500 rpm; with optional high-performance head, XK140 made 210 bhp at 5750 rpm and 213 pound-feet at 4000 rpm. [3]8.5:1 with optional automatic transmission. [4]Standard. During the model year, a three-speed manual replaced the automatic as standard in the Corvette. Thunderbird and XK140 both listed overdrive as optional; Thunderbird also offered an optional three-speed automatic. [5]Standard with transmission listed in chart.