

Jason Len, one of the best-known Jaguar restorers and parts purveyor in the US, in his racing XK 120.

# XKs UNLIMITED

*Alan Jabez profiles Jason Len and his impressive Californian enterprise*

Half way between Los Angeles and San Francisco on the Californian coast is the wonderfully peaceful town of St Louis Obispo. Instead of the hustle and bustle and crime problems of the big cities, this is a coastal oasis where people keep their cars unlocked and where the sun shines most days of the year.

It's also the home of XKs Unlimited,



the only dedicated Jaguar restoration shop on the American west coast and a welcome sight for any British car enthusiast.

Started by Jason Len in the 1970s, it has now grown to become one of the main Jaguar parts distribution centres throughout north America, as well as a

place where some of LA's leading celebrities get their cars restored.

Jason is a self-confessed Jaguar fanatic who has virtually lost count of the number of cars he has restored or repaired. He initially moved to the area in the 1960s to undertake a degree course in mechanical engineering at the nearby Cal Pol technical college. One of his lecturers was a serious Jaguar enthusiast and so bits and pieces of different models would regularly appear in class.

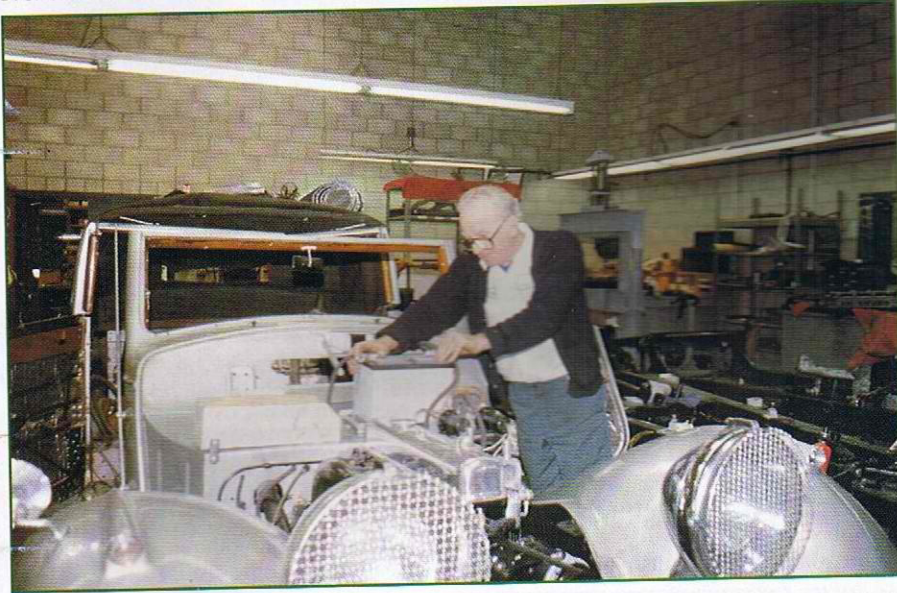
Having got the car in his blood, Jason then began to repair and sell Jaguars – along with Frog-Eye Sprites, Lotuses, Morgans and other British sports cars – from the front yard of his shared student house. As he was mak-



ing useful money, he subsequently decided to set himself up in business as a local Jaguar repair specialist. He bought a tiny garage, discovered an English mechanic called Cliff Bridge who was living in the area, and so began a business which has blossomed ever since.



*XKs Unlimited now have major premises near the local airport.*



*Geoff Bridge teamed up with Jason over 20 years ago; he has since been joined by around 19 other staff. Here Geoff works on a Mk IV drophead.*

From those humble beginnings the company have now moved into large modern premises just a couple of hundred yards from the town's small airport. Outside are wonderful views of California's rolling green hills, while the Pacific ocean is less than half an hour's drive away.

Cliff Bridge, originally from Radcliffe, near Manchester, is still working there, more than 20 years on. He has now been joined by three other English and four American mechanics. The company also employ another dozen or so sales and administration staff who primarily work on the parts side.

Their reputation has spread far and wide. For instance, they recently completed the restoration of American TV chat show host Jay Leno's XK 120.

"We get all sorts of cars and in all sorts of conditions," says Jason. "But we'll do whatever the customer wants."

They offer three levels of restoration. The first is effectively a cosmetic clean-up. For this, they will re-paint the car, replace the upholstery and carpets and undertake basic component re-building. The second level includes all the above and anything else required to produce a car which has a 'street level finish' or, as Jason claims, would be a respectable entrant at any car show. For the third level, however, the fin-

ished car will be in concours condition. For this, the car will be completely stripped and every mechanical component given a thorough overhaul – down to the last washer on the locks. In addition, the car would be re-painted inside and out, with every piece of interior trim also being replaced. The result of such an extensive overhaul would be a car not only worthy to enter any competition but a likely winner.

Typically, with some of the cars they

are offered, the owners might have done a partial restoration themselves but have given up because of lack of time or skills. With others, they will be asked to strip the car down and restore it from scratch. These jobs could take more than a year to complete and cost anything up to \$100,000.

Geoff Welles, the general manager who photographs all the cars during the restoration process and sends them to the owners, tells the story of a Japanese doctor who recently bought an 'E' type in the US, asked XKs to rebuild it to race standard condition and, once completed, plans to travel to the US several times a year to race it at major events.

"People go to all sorts of lengths to have the car they want," says Geoff. "We are really in the toy, not the car, business."

Their growing reputation is such that, for their annual open day in October, they are now getting more than 200 Jaguars driving long distances to get to St Louis Obispo to look around the premises and enjoy the week-end party. Some even come down the west coast from Canada, more than 1,000 miles away, while last year, one owner drove all the way from Florida – a journey of about 3,000 miles.

They also get many enthusiasts who drop by as they are driving along the nearby Pacific Coast Highway, a road which drives as well as it sounds. "A lot of Australian enthusiasts have heard of us and seem to come here as soon as they get off the plane at Los Angeles," Jason says. But he is very accommodating and lets everyone wander around the showroom which has a drophead 'Mark IV' on display, as well as the workshop. "If people can



*Jose Marsical, one of four American mechanics in the company, gets to grips with an 'E' type.*



take the trouble to come all the way to see us, we are happy to spend some time with them," he says in his typically relaxed manner.

Jason called the company XKs Unlimited because, when he started, he worked exclusively on XKs. But this has now broadened to all Jaguars manufactured after 1948, as well as a number of other British sports cars. They recently restored Whitney Houston's MG and have also re-built Rolls-Royces.

Although it is the workshop which has all the glamour, it is the parts side of the business which has helped the company grow so rapidly over the years. They now have 13,000 parts in stock for all Jaguars since 1948, with about three-quarters being imported from Britain. They are all listed on computer database and can be retrieved from the shelves in minutes. "We get calls everyday from across America and sometimes from overseas," says Jason. "In fact, we once shipped an engine all the way back to Britain." He also takes pride in that all the calls are answered by experts and enthusiasts – not simply telesales people – able to advise a customer on the precise part they may need.



Anyone is welcome to drop by at XKs Unlimited and enjoy a coffee while looking at their operation – and such as this freshly-restored Series 2 'E' type roadster.

Proof of the company's success is that Jason recently moved into a new mansion style home with a ten-car garage. The need for such a large garage, he explains, is that he can come home in the evening and do what he enjoys most – restore old Jaguars. Most are 120s and 'E' types but he has recently also been tackling an MG TC. "It's not work," he says, "it's relaxation."

The quality of his craftsmanship

often impresses people so much that they will make him an offer he can't refuse to buy the finished car.

The problem will come in another 20 years when Jason gets close to retirement. He does have four daughters but, so far, none has shown any interest in taking over the business. "Some of them do at least come to the car shows," he jokes.

His own dream for the future is a trip around Europe in a 120. With his record for making things happen, it's a dream likely to be realised.

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