

LIFE IN THE OLD CAT YET

Sportscar racer SAM HANCOCK fulfils a childhood dream by driving the iconic Silk Cut Jaguar XJR-9LM Le Mans winner



Conditions were tricky but our man kept his foot in!



"Like Elle MacPherson on wheels" reckons Hancock

Having tested a handful of outrageous Group C cars for Autosport a few months ago, I thought I'd had more than my fair share of driving delicacies. So when presented with the opportunity to try what must rate as the all-time fan fave, the achingly sexy Jaguar XJR-9LM, only a natural disaster was going to stop me getting to Silverstone for my go in the 1988 Le Mans winner.

Someone 'up there', however, clearly considered that a challenge and as I cranked up the wiper speed with every passing junction on the M40, I started to wonder if the realisation of this boyhood dream was not to be after all. A quick call to Juliet, the amazingly laid back Jaguar PR, and I half expected her to suggest I turn back and head home. Far from it – not only was the test very much still on, despite torrential rain at the circuit, but did I mind if the sandwiches were running out (guess my reputation preceded me!) and that there was unlikely to be any tea or coffee? Er, no, I thought. I'd fast for a month if it meant driving your motor!

Slightly more worrying was what Juliet casually threw in at the end of this fleeting exchange. And no, it was nothing to do with not having any biscuits. "By the way, the car's on cut-slicks because we haven't got any wets. Okay with that?"

"Oh yes, sure," I said, silently mouthing a torrent

of four letter expletives, cursing my luck that today, of all days, had to be one where I'd have been better off with snorkel and goggles than a crash helmet.

Rounding the corner into the 'Stowe' circuit car park and I felt my heart race in anticipation of what lay ahead. It was like getting a date with a supermodel. For years I'd gazed longingly at all her photos and seen all her movies but finally here I was getting to meet her in the flesh. And boy oh boy, she didn't disappoint.

Like Elle MacPherson on wheels, this classic beauty had an ageless style. Two decades past her supposed prime, the XJR-9LM is still effortlessly gorgeous and infinitely more sexy than many of her more modern derivatives. Swathed in her famous purple, white and yellow cloak, her style is racy "Le Mans-chic" where beauty happily follows function. Adorned with every critical accessory to confirm that this is the 'real thing' (number 2 on the nose, the words 'Dumfries, Lammers, Wallace on the doors) she has an ethereal beauty that has somehow become even more refined with age. It's an eerie timelessness, a look that totally encapsulates the Group C era of the period and yet one that would not look out of place at Le Mans nowadays.

BETTER OUT THAN IN

Prepared to perfection by Don Law and his troops, I am surprised at their willingness to run the car in

such torrid conditions. But, as soon as they fire up the 7.0-litre, normally aspirated V12, I instantly 'get it' – this car is too good, too alive to be consigned to the museum. There's clearly life in the old cat yet and wow, what a purr. Like a loyal pet sensing the long awaited return of her master, the spirited engine ignites instantly into life as original 'pilot' Andy Wallace dons helmet and gloves in preparation for the ultimate reunion.

TECH SPEC JAGUAR XJR-9LM



YEAR	1988
BUILT BY	TWR
ENGINE	7-LITRE, 60-DEGREE V12
POWER	745BHP
LENGTH	4821MM
WIDTH	2019MM
HEIGHT	1031MM
WHEELBASE	2710MM
WEIGHT	1050KG
GEARBOX	5-SPEED MARCH/TWR
TOP SPEED	236MPH
MAX DOWNFORCE	4000LB

Andy has done thousands of miles in this car, but today it's my turn. After a few trouble-free but clearly treacherous warm-up laps, Andy pits to hand me the reins with a brilliantly understated, "all yours, mate!"

Climbing into the driving seat and I'm struck by how fresh everything looks inside the cockpit. Amid the vast expanse of Silverstone grass and tarmac – much the same as at any race track – there's nothing really here to put the Jag's age into perspective. It's as though it has somehow managed to transcend time. In fact, only a few lightly discoloured and 'charmingly' hand-written labels give the game away and offer a sharp reminder



LM still wears official ACO stickers from '88 24 Hours

of my steed's total originality – and value!

Working my way down through a vertical series of switches, thoughtfully positioned driver's-right (factory prepared cars always seem to have the simplest and most logical cockpit layouts) and I can't help but feel a little like a soldier being strapped in and sent off to battle in command of the most effective of weapons.

Ignition 'On' – click. Pumps 'On' – click. Lights 'On' – click. 'Start' – wow! The hairs on the back of my neck stand instantly to attention as I am greeted by an amazing cacophony of sound that seems to judder through every bone in my body. My blood, now on



Hancock had to use cut slicks in rain-fashed test. Yikes!

overdrive, races through every capillary sending my nerve endings into a state of heightened alert. Only a V12 can have such an effect.

At low revs on tick-over, the tone is husky, burbling away with a musical pointedness. But, like a tenor preparing for a great concerto, a few flicks of my right foot reveal enormous bursts of volume, all twelve cylinders roaring away with spine-tingling harmony. They convey a sense of such extraordinary power that, as I peer through an impressively heated and optically perfect curved windscreen at a now drenched race track, I wonder how on earth I'm going to keep it on the island.

Selecting first gear from the five-speed H-pattern manual gearbox, I pull the delicate looking lever through a 'Dog-leg' to the left and back. Releasing a surprisingly light clutch the LM pulls away with ease. Strangely, it's the throttle that's most heavy – perhaps sprung deliberately so to help prevent the driver from releasing all 800-odd horsepower in one go. In conditions like these I fear that's going to be about as effective as a chocolate teapot.

Now, I don't know if you know the Stowe circuit at Silverstone, but try if you will to imagine the diametric opposite to Le Mans. Little more than three points of a tiny triangle linked by two short, bumpy straights and a twiddly bit – hardly the ideal venue for a car built to exceed 210mph between the Armo-lined barriers

TRACK TEST
JAGUAR XJR-9LM

of the Mulsanne straight. More so, the fact that the car is also in full Le Mans-spec underneath the bodywork as well, with extra long gear ratios and 'spool' final drive in place of a differential (great for getting back to the pits mid-race in the event of drive shaft failure, not so great in assisting the car around slow, tight corners. Especially in the wet!).

Taking the first lap at what feels like walking pace and already the car ploughs through the corners with such excessive understeer that I can barely keep it on the road, let alone stick to any kind of a racing line.

A couple of laps in and I'm starting to wonder if there's any point: the grip is minimal and the circuit so short that I've yet to get out of second gear.

FAMILIARITY AT A STROKE

But then the Jaguar does something special and gives me an insight into exactly why it was such a successful racing car.

After only a short period of time I notice that I already feel very much at home in the Jag – as though it's just thrilled to be driven again and more than happy for me to call the shots rather than the other way around. Even in these torrid conditions, everything feels so progressive that I am filled with confidence and marvel at just how drivable a car this is. The monstrous snarl of the wild predator I'd heard warming up in the pits turns out to be the sleekest of pussycats when let off the leash.

Straightening the wheel onto the wider back straight, I give my first really meaningful prods on the throttle. We're only in first gear but so tight was the preceding corner that the revs have dropped low enough for there to be a slight pause while the engine wakes up to receive my command.

I don't have to wait long. With a wail of mechanical and induction noise, clashing gloriously behind my left ear, I feel every one of the 800 stallions propelling me forwards with unabated enthusiasm. Almost immediately the rear tyres break traction, struggling to keep up with the revs that have already changed key to a soundtrack several octaves higher. Grabbing second with a short but precise throw across the gate and only for a moment do the rears make friends with the asphalt. But soon they've fallen out again, in a squabble for supremacy that would make Brown and Cameron proud.



Hancock (left) eulogises with '88 Le Mans winner Wallace

With the rear end dancing as it searches desperately for any hint of dry-ish road I have to apply little flicks of opposite lock to keep the car pointing in a vaguely straight line. Bearing down on the next corner I commit early on the brakes in a vain attempt to lose the tremendous momentum that's been gathered – I forgive the slightly wooden feeling through the pedal for the fact that at least it seems to have some effect.

Down again to first gear with a huge heel-and-toe 'blip' on the throttle to stop the rear axle from locking and I can do no more than tip-toe through said 'twiddly' bit. After a sharp burst of power to neutralise the outrageous understeer on the exit, I take it easy down the pit straight partly because it would be all too easy to spin like a top into the concrete wall running along its length, and partly in sympathy for anxious onlookers standing nervously behind it!

Up at the far end of the circuit though, there's an abundance of space and I can feel the Jag egging me on to have some fun. A little later and harder on the brakes now and the rear end squirms under

deceleration. Going deliberately slow into the tight left-hander, I manage to keep the car on line enough to provide plenty of room for tom-foolery on the exit. With a not insignificant amount of steering still applied I prod and provoke the Jag early on the throttle and she offers the most gracious response.

Commanded by the most insane amount of torque, the needle on the rev counter resumes its Can-Can routine as the tyres hold up their hands in sheer exasperation. With its pert backside now elegantly drifting under direct instruction from the throttle, it's right now that it strikes me: if this great cat – even on a day like today – can still belie her years and perform with the virile agility of a young cub, it's no wonder that two decades ago her prey found itself stalked and ambushed with a savage efficiency that left it gasping in her wake.

There may not be a Jaguar on the grid at Le Mans these days, but I can only hope that it's not too long before the feline predator returns from the shadows to grace us once again with her awesome presence. ☑



240mph Le Mans monster is almost as wide as it is long



Made to measure: it's a tight fit for our man in the LM's cockpit



Historic prep ace Don Law talks Hancock through switchgear

ALPIS DE NEVEHEAD