

# Daddy LONG-LEGGED

The meticulously restored E-type Chassis Number 1 offers a rare understanding of the furore the model's launch caused in the early '60s, says **James Elliott**

PHOTOGRAPHY: TONY BAKER

**I**n terms of tangled webs, the history of this E-type is a cat's cradle bundled up in silk strands. By Spiderman. But unraveled it all and the nugget of truth at the centre is that this is a very important car. Of course, after the collecting boom kicked off in the 1980s, myriad E-types seemed to become hugely significant overnight thanks to low chassis numbers, brief competition history or fleeting appearances in press shots. Strip away the more tenuous – or, in some cases, outright spurious – claims and you are left with a far more select, elite group of machinery. The Geneva show cars, naturally, the factory-built Lightweight and the earliest production cars.

Among them, therefore, should come this outwardly unassuming but wonderfully restored beauty. Why? Because this E-type is actually the first fixed-head, right-hand-drive production car, chassis 860001. Referred to simply as 'Chassis Number 1', it was built on 10 July 1961 and despatched on 28 August, four months on from the model's sensational unveiling at Geneva and after some 200 roadsters had already been built.

If you, like so many thousands, spent the early 1960s gawping into a certain famous panoramic car showroom window on Piccadilly, leaving trails of drool down the glass while scarcely able to comprehend the beauty of Browns Lane's



shiny new masterpiece – and not for a second able to believe its sub-£2100 price – the chances are you were staring at this car. If you don't recognise it immediately, that would be because it was registered differently in those days. From the production line it was delivered straight to Henlys in London, the world's biggest billboard for the rakish new Jaguar. Enthusiasts and visitors to the capital from all over the world flocked to admire its sleek lines, the lucky ones adding their names to an order book so unexpectedly burgeoning that it was bursting at the seams.

Links between Jaguar and Henlys went back to the very start, when Bertie Henly put in the first sizeable order for William Lyons' new, Austin Seven-based Swallow. Henly commissioned 500 of the aluminium two-seaters at £175 apiece, playing a major role in setting up Lyons as a serious car builder and establishing a lengthy and close relationship between his chain of garages and Jaguar. Henlys rapidly became Jaguar's most important customer and Browns Lane, ever-conscious of the need to keep its principal distributor on-side, made sure that the impressive London outlet was prioritised by sending it the very first production fixed-head.

If only the rest of 1 VHP's early history was so clear-cut. Even the easy bits are complicated – or plain bizarre, such as its sale for just £1 in the late 1990s. What we do know is this: the car emerged in the early 1970s, registered 480 HYT, with a then-21-year-old David Hamer. When Hamer bought the car, for something shy of £250, it had been damaged and the interior had gone astray, but he set about making it roadworthy. With 1 VHP's illustrious history unknown at that stage and the penchant for originality still nearly a generation away – as far as anyone knew at the time the E-type was nothing more than a distressed old banger – Hamer resprayed it in a typically lurid '70s hue of metallflake purple. Later in his renovation and parts hunt Hamer inevitably found out the car's chassis number, had it confirmed by Jaguar guru Andrew Whyte and, as he told *Jaguar World* in 2004, decided he

didn't want to be remembered as "the man who ruined a piece of art". Back to square one then.

As the car became better known, buyers started to come out of the woodwork, the most persistent – and eventually successful – being Adrian Hamilton. It was then quickly sold on to a Beaconsfield owner who in turn sold it to collector Derek Brant, who also had a roadster from *The Italian Job* and the Geneva show car, 9600 HP. When Brant decided to sell, historian and arch-enthusiast Philip Porter snapped up the lot. He remembers: "I bought all three in one deal in 1977, paying £2500 for Chassis Number 1 [then registered XVE 1], £2650 for 9600 HP and £600 for the roadster. That was about right, it certainly wasn't a silly amount. No one really knew how important they were at the time. Well, a bit of history was known about Chassis Number 1, but in those days it was pretty unsubstantiated and to a degree inconsequential. In monetary terms their history was seen as much as an interesting novelty as anything else. No one could guess how significant that history would come to be viewed as, especially when the truth behind 9600 HP and the *Italian Job* car came to light."

"Chassis Number 1 had stood around for many years. It was on the road initially, and was technically MoT-able and quite presentable, but some restoration had been done. David Hamer



Above, left to right: perfect engine bay hints at fastidious restoration; tub and subframe went back to bare metal. Below: 1 VHP offered many their first view of sublime profile. Right: period-correct cabin



### JAGUAR E-TYPE 3.8 S1 FHC

**Sold/number built:** 1961-64/7669  
**Construction:** steel monocoque with tubular front subframe  
**Engine:** front-mounted, iron-block, alloy-head, dohc 3781cc straight-six fed by three SU HDB carburetors  
**Max power:** 265hp @ 5500rpm  
**Max torque:** 260lb ft @ 4000rpm  
**Transmission:** Most four-speed manual with synchro on second, third and top, driving rear wheels  
**Suspension:** independent, at front by wishbones, torsion bars, telescopic shock absorbers; rear lower transverse links, radius arms, twin coil/shock absorber units, anti-roll bars f/r  
**Steering:** rack and pinion, 2R turns lock to lock  
**Brakes:** 11in (279mm), front, 10in (254mm) rear discs  
**Wheels/tyres:** aluminium 72-spoke 15in wheels/Dunlop RS-5 6.40x15  
**Length:** 14ft 7½in (4457mm) **Width:** 5ft 4¾in (1631mm) **Height:** 4ft (1219mm)  
**Wheelbase:** 8ft (2439mm)  
**Weight:** 2670lb (1211kg)  
**0-60mph:** 7.1 secs **Top speed:** 150mph  
**Mpg:** 18-20  
**Price new:** £2098 **Price now:** from £25k (for a good, standard S1 FHC)

had done a fair amount of work, but standards and values were a bit different then."

At the time, Porter part-owned a restoration business and he set about the car, undoing much of Hamer's work and discovering a whole set of new problems – mainly rot – in the process. What was to have been a quickfire, sub-six-month job stalled amid problems with suppliers and, as contemporary tastes moved on and Porter became "almost embarrassed" at the condition of such a revered car, he struck an extraordinary deal with Peter Neumark, historic racer, enthusiast and chairman of up-and-coming Jaguar specialist Classic Motor Cars. Porter was determined that the cars should be restored, Neumark wanted a showpiece – preferably a historically important one – to demonstrate what his company was capable of. "One of the conditions of buying the cars was that I would keep them in the UK, which I have honoured," explains Porter. "The work just came to a halt and the cars stood around for some time. Then Peter and I struck our 'deal'. Actually, that's not a very nice word for what was a very gentlemanly process – perhaps saying that we came to an arrangement would be more accurate."

And that arrangement was? "Peter was as keen as me that both cars should be properly restored – and to a frankly fanatical standard – so I sold him 1 VHP for £1 in 1999 in return for him totally restoring both that car and 9600 HP. To



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be honest, my contribution up to that point had not been very distinguished except for rescuing the car in the first place, so I was just happy it was going to such a good home."

At that point the cars moved to CMC's Bridgnorth premises and the project was taken over by Vicarage founder and CMC boss Nick Goldthorp. There was no shortage of work to be done, as he says: "It was a massive learning process, but we're getting quicker! We did 9600 HP first and that took 3250 hours, then 1 VHP wasn't quite as long because so much of the research had already been done. That came in at about 2500 hours over 18 months. We're now working on chassis 4 – 'Lofty' England's roadster – and that should be a bit quicker again."

It was soon discovered that the work on 1 VHP would have to be rather more extensive than it might have appeared on the surface, so a quick patch-up was out of the question. "In a sense it is much easier dealing with completely rotten but original cars that no one has previously got at," says Goldthorp. "You can't really blame the previous owners because times – plus what people expect and what restorers can do – have changed greatly, but in essence we found we had to undo two previous restorations before we could start to build it up again."

Was it worth it? "Well, unless another one comes to light, it's the only E-type left in the world with chassis 1. It's matching numbers too,

so we're dealing with something a bit special – not least because most prototypes got destroyed or Jaguar didn't issue a chassis number."

As a result, this car tells us far more about the 1960s E-type experience than one of the hand-built prototypes could hope to reveal, as Goldthorp confirms: "With 9600 HP it appeared that quite a few of the panels had not been pressed out and had been hand-made. Mechanically the cars are identical, but on 9600 HP there were also quite a few unique details – such as the ashtray in the centre console, swages in the floor and air catchers in the ducts – that the production engineers clearly took out to make it cheaper. As a car off the production line, 1 VHP was much simpler. Even though it was one of very few cars with details such as outside bonnet locks, that's not a big deal when you consider the unique features on a hand-built car."

It is no surprise after such a restoration that this car is now absolutely pristine inside and out – possibly better than when it rolled off Jaguar's nascent E-type production line in 1961 – but the effect it has on the driver is something else, offering the ability in a new millennium to feel all the sensations of the excited E-type owner in the early 1960s, far enough back that The Beatles hadn't even left their imprint on culture.

Step into 1 VHP and you are transported back in time, almost as if you were a Henlys customer getting a cherished run in its widely husted-after



wise, from main: 12-cylinder engine offers tireless pace; long wheelbase and narrow track; slender-rimmed wheels; registration has been on the chassis; sleek, modern cabin

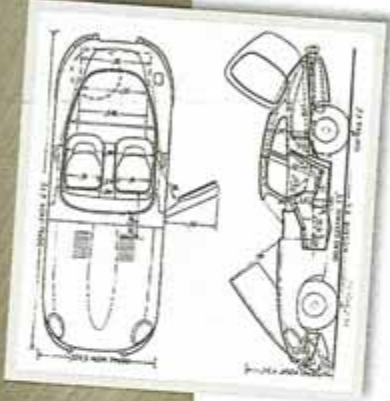


demonstrator. It really needs an A35 and a black cab to chug past to complete the picture, but even without them this is an ample illustration of the impact the E-type must have had in its day. It is the very emotional, tactile, sensory overload that every classic motoring journalist longs for. I wasn't even born until 1968, but opening up this time portal gives rare insight and understanding as to why the E-type remains an icon, why so many with a few more years under their belts still nostalgically regard it as not just a watershed, but *the* watershed.

The cabin effortlessly melds the ornate class of the 1950s with a slightly more sleek and toned feel, appropriate for a car boasting – however dubiously – 150mph potential. The bucket seats might be a slender throwback to the '50s, but that embossed aluminium dash panel moves the game on, continuing the later XKs' programme of stripping out the most overtly twee details and replacing them with restrained modernism.

The driving experience is sublime too: the acceleration electric, the Moss 'box taut but characterfully slow. In an era besotted with the space race, the sound barrier and rapid technological advancement, this car must have made its owners feel like test pilots venturing into the unknown, approaching warp speed with no idea what lay on the other side. All that from an ageing 3.8-litre twin-cam fed by triple SUs.

The 260lb ft of torque makes the car sensationally tractable, the ride soft by today's standards, but slightly firm for the 1960s. The handling is easy to unsettle, but surprisingly difficult to lose on public roads considering the combination of such a long wheelbase (8ft) with



a relatively narrow (4ft 2in) track and 265bhp – according to the *Eternal Optimists Dept* at Browns Lane – pumping through the rear wheels with pulse-like smoothness and consistency.

That's not to mention the skinny crossply tyres chirruping across the road on 15in wires.

Yet step back, reflect and it is all too easy to realise that you have been blinded to criticism by how pure and modern the E-type looks and feels, and deafened to doubt by how it sounds. There is no question that it is a sensational car, but an approach such as an early example with a healthy dose of scepticism and you might just find that its interior appointment, its thoroughly modern outline, all-independent suspension and urgent straight-six roar rather exaggerate what a great leap forward it was. Goldthorpe concurs: "Early original E-types look sensationally beautiful, but the truth is they are not much better to drive than a really well-sorted late XK."

It would be remiss to overlook the fact that there was a good deal of smoke and mirrors about the E-type, but lunacy to suggest that it is a case of the emperor's new clothes. And it is only thanks to cars as early as this, in this kind of condition, that we can still truly put an eternal idol such as the E-type into perspective.

Who cares anyway? There is something so special about Malcolm Sayers and William Lyons' creation that, when you step out of one, that Henlys window feels maybe a week or two in the past rather than 45-plus years ago. In 1961 the very idea of a car enjoying such enduring longevity – and ending up as an exhibit in art museums – was pure science fiction, as unthinkable as a man walking on the moon. ■