



# Carrying on the breed

When a Coldstream Guards Colonel wanted pre-war looks but post-war performance in the 1950s, he built this aluminium-bodied special on a factory supplied XK 140 chassis. Individual, it most certainly is...

Words: Paul Walton Contemporary Pics: Michael Bailie

**T**he past is a foreign country' starts LP Hartley's 1953 masterpiece *The Go Between*; 'they do things differently there.'

There's no better example of this than in 1955 when the wonderfully named Colonel Rixon-Bucknall wanted a new sports car. While most of us today would have been more than happy with the epitome of 1950s cool, a Jaguar XK 140, it wasn't what the Colonel wanted. And so he built his own.

Although he'd enjoyed a long and varied succession of cars (including an SS 1½-litre), by the mid-1950s this former Coldstream Guards Colonel found modern machines to lack the charm of their pre-war counterparts, but they in turn lacked the performance he enjoyed. The solution was simple – the single-minded Colonel would build one that looked like a pre-war tourer but with the running gear of a contemporary sports car. Or, as he wrote in a 1957 edition of *Autosport* about the car: "To blend the appeal of

the vintage thoroughbred with the finest current technical attainments; to produce a machine which requires driving and which in return will give all the response and joy of the traditional vintage sports car – in other words, to aim at carrying on the breed."

## An individual build

The first question was what to base his special on. The Colonel soon dismissed a Bentley Continental since it was too bulky to tackle the steep mountain passes he planned on his European trips, a Frazer Nash because it didn't offer more than a 2.0-litre engine, and an Aston Martin since the waiting list was too long. This left Jaguar.

Despite it not being company policy to sell running chassis, it relented on this occasion since Rixon-Bucknall was one of William Lyons' earliest customers, having bought a Swallow sidecar in 1922. And so in January 1956 Browns Lane delivered an XK 140 chassis complete with

a 3.4-litre SE XK unit with the C-type cylinder head. Borrani wire wheels and Marchal lights were added.

Next, Rixon-Bucknall needed a coachbuilder to construct the car. He contacted 39 firms but found that none wanted the job because they were either too busy or were only prepared to build what they thought he should have and not



Colonel Rixon-Bucknall on European Tour with his special

The Special as it is today and, right, with the Colonel at the wheel when the car was new. Note the deletion of the running boards and the shortened tail in the modern shot – changes the Colonel made after his second European tour



what he wanted, something that still bothered him when he wrote his *Autosport* article. "He (the customer) cannot be expected to pay a great deal of money for a result he does not like or does not desire."

Eventually, Rixon-Bucknall found Lesley Tye of the Hastings Sheet Metal Works who agreed to take on the project. But all the Colonel had in the way of ideas was a picture of an MG 18/80 with a body by Carbodies and several sheets of paper with copious notes. The man who was given the task of translating these notes into reality was Hastings employee, Alan Jenner.

"The Colonel was a very nice man to work for," Jenner told us, 52 years after he worked for him. "He knew exactly what he wanted, but it wasn't an easy task." No drawings were ever made since it was all done by eye. "He'd visit the workshop fairly frequently and I'd show him something I'd designed in cardboard and he'd say 'Great – build it.'" With the design agreed, the frame was then built using 1in, 16-gauge

mild angle sections, with the body customised from 16-gauge aluminium.

The interior, trimmed by a local firm, was very much to a military man's specification with a place for everything and everything in its place. There was a compartment in the boot for his shoe cleaning kit, another for replacement bulbs, thermostats etc, plus two leather holders, one for his umbrella (custom made, with each panel being a different racing flag) and one behind the seats for a spare half-shaft.

Finally, Jenner painted the car red with black wings – the same colours as the Colonel's beloved Coldstream Guards uniform, mixed especially for him by a firm in Brighton. "He was always very proud of his association with the Guards," says Jenner.

### Special touring

The Colonel took delivery of the car in March 1957 and a few months later he and his second wife, Pauline, took a trip to the Pyrenees to find

out how well it went. He wrote of the car, "She handled magnificently, and the engine and brake cooling were superb." The only trouble came from the electrical system since spark plugs kept fouling. On his return the Colonel soon made Lucas aware of the situation and it sent a specialist to sort out the problem. More extensive European trips followed and the Colonel was often accompanied by his friend, George Grigs, who would take his camera to record their adventures.

Rixon-Bucknall had also made friends with fellow Jaguar enthusiast, Bill Slack, the workshop manager at a local garage, Caffyns. He soon became interested in the Special and on Rixon's return from his second European tour suggested a number of alterations.

These included shortening the tail by three inches, removing the full-length running boards to replace them with cycle wings (apparently to stop the front end lift Rixon was experiencing at high-speed) and replacing the original screen

The Special as it is today and, right, with the Colonel at the wheel when the car was new. Note the deletion of the running boards and the shortened tail in the modern shot – changes the Colonel made after his second European tour



The interior is snug, but comfortable, and is very well thought out – the boot even includes a compartment for a shoe cleaning kit! The 3.4-litre XK engine now features triple carburetors and a straight-port head

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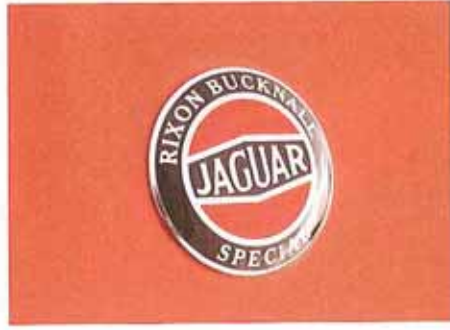
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with two separate pieces of glass with an increased rake. The pair also updated the engine with a straight-port head and triple carburetors, making an already fast car even faster. According to Grigs in a letter written to the current owner, "On one occasion on which I was driving it, I was thrilled to top 'the ton' for the second time in my life."

The Colonel kept the 'Red Car' and it was only sold after his death in the 1970s. It disappeared until 1988 when a Jaguar enthusiast, Mike Hughes, bought it. "It was for sale at David AC Royle Co Ltd, a restoration specialist near Darlington, Co. Durham, says Mike, "A friend and I went to see it, purely to sightsee."

"However, the minute I saw the car, I knew I had to buy it and although it was well out of my price range at £23k, I was determined and so I sold both my modern car (an XJ12) and Manx Norton project, borrowed £4k off my then girlfriend and the rest on finance!"



## Out of hiding

At that point in time there was very little information about the car as it had been out of circulation for a long period. Royles had secured it from a repair company that had held the Special for many years due to non-payment of bills by the owner, who Mike assumes bought it from the Colonel's estate. This long period of storage at least meant it was original and complete.

It had also lost none of its speed. "I recall driving the car back from Royles on B roads," continues Mike. "My girlfriend was following me. When we got home she complained that I had been doing 85mph and couldn't keep up. The car felt incredibly fast and as a reference it was easily able to out accelerate a VW Golf GTi – as I used to take delight in proving."

Mike sold the car after 18 months but instantly regretted it and always wanted it back. Fifteen years later in 2002 he was able to do this. Although still original, the car was looking tired and so he gave the task of restoration to Jaguar specialist, Classic Motor Cars.

"I was very careful to ensure nothing was lost from the original and we actually re-instated several original features – the beauty of a special is that I am the only marque expert."

The result is a car that, in its bright red paint and with the Colonel's original registration number plate, RB 1903 (the year of his birth) looks as fresh as the day he collected it from Hastings. Open the boot and all the

compartments are still there, as is his umbrella in its original leather holder. It's like entering a time warp and I'm expecting the Colonel to storm up to me any minute to ask what the blazes I'm doing touching his car.

It's an attractive machine too, although it can look awkward from some angles (especially the rear three quarter view). For the uninformed, it fulfills the Colonel's brief of looking like a pre-war car; the wings, the lights, the radiator grille, all help to maintain illusion for the uninitiated.

## Post-war performance

Open the suicide door and you climb up into the car since the body sits high on the chassis. It's snug inside, offering a similar amount of room as an XK 120 coupe would, but it's still comfortable. "She is a Queen Elizabeth battleship as opposed to a Queen Elizabeth liner," was how the Colonel described his car. And it shows. While the dark-wooden dash is beautiful, there are few frills and the dials and switches are all placed logically and sensibly.

Despite the lack of frills, the Colonel always wanted the car to be a comfortable tourer for his long distance holidays rather than an over blown hot-rod and he succeeded since it's such a smooth, easy car to drive. The XK unit has so much torque it'll still accelerate up a hill in top while the steering is light and the four-speed box clicks smoothly into gear. It doesn't wander around on the road, either, but rides straight,

and you soon get the feeling that the Colonel – wearing his old regimental tie and blazer – would have happily cruised at 100mph as he crossed Europe.

The Special feels light, lithe and very responsive because of it. Imagine sliding down the slippiest of children's slides – this is what it's like to accelerate hard in the Special since it gains speed effortlessly and smoothly. You're carried along on one long tsunami of torque that seems to last forever until finally the engine screams no more and it's time to grasp that short, stubby gear stick and change up. It's a wonderful, exhilarating experience.

Thanks to precise steering and little body roll, the Special isn't just a car for driving in straight lines either. The steering is nicely weighted – not too stiff, but offering just enough resistance to turn into long, swooping corners at speed comfortably and confidently.

It's here, as I power out of yet another fast corner, that it occurs to me there's something oddly modern about the Special since at its heart is a stripped out, lightweight sports car, the sort that's common place today. So bizarrely, while he wanted to carry on the breed of pre-war cars, what Colonel Rixon-Bucknall actually built was something modern and contemporary for today. So not only is the past a foreign place, it's an ironic one too.

*Thanks to the owner, Mike Hughes, and to Nick Goldthorpe of Classic Motor Cars (01746 765804)*