EPIC BATTLES

ASTON MARTIN DB7 VS JAGUAR XK8

Both produced when their makers had access to Ford pennies, are the DB7 – 20 years old this year – and XK8 more than stifled compromises?

WORDS Nick Larkin PHOTOGRAPHY John Colley

Knowing you're about to drive an Aston Martin DB7 and Jaguar XK8 in some anger, it would be very tempting to reach into your bathroom medicine cabinet. Not for something to suppress your excitement, though that might seem a good idea.

The search is on for a good roll of sticking plaster, ready to cut up and paste over the badges of the two cars. Both marques are of deep and uncompromising legend, and here are undeniably two beautiful shapes. We have, says, the badge, an Aston Martin – surely the right royal ruler of shaken but not stirred cool.

Just a mention of the name sears the brain with Bond-style explosions, Royal weddings and rosy images of British craftsmanship. The Aston Martin DB7 – the car before us – is celebrating its 20th birthday this year.

With Jaguar, we might be at Le Mans or watching rain trickle over the curves of a D-type. But we could just as likely be travelling to Netto in a £1000 X-type, wondering why the Mk2 John Thaw drove as 'Morse' had a vinyl roof, or watching 1960s villains tear off down the High Road in a bright red Mk2.

Jaguar is a marque we deeply love, but does it conjure up the perfection of Aston?

The cars are waiting, but what are they like to drive and, casting away all the myths and thousands of words published about these cars, which really is the best?

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THANKS TO Barry Day, Specialists Cars of Radcliffe M26 4LB www.specialistscars.co.uk, 07973 616791. The Aston tested is for sale for £21,000, while our Jaguar is up at £11,000.

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The back story: How Aston Martin and Jaguar raided Ford's bank account to their advantage

Both marques were under the ownership of Ford when these cars were new, and the profits earned from inflicting endless Sierras and Escorts upon society had been put to good use by being poured into the two prestige British manufacturers.

Ford had bought a stake in Aston Martin in 1987, before taking over completely, and almost certainly saving it from oblivion. Jaguar was snapped up for £1.6bn in 1989 by a delighted Ford also prepared to give its new acquisition the much-needed development funds for a rebirth.

Consequently, both the DB7 and XK8 would have a stillborn Jaguar model originating in 1980 as their base. The XJ41/42 roadster (below) and coupé were to designed from the XJ40's platform as sports cars to appease those who thought the XJ-S was an over-appointed slush bucket.

These back-to-sporting-roots Jaguars were eagerly anticipated and planned for launch in 1986, but, for financial and other reasons, were not ready when Ford took over. They were unceremoniously axed on cost grounds.

However Tom Walkinshaw, who had raced Jaguar XJ-S in the 1980s, and set up TWR Racing, was convinced a version of the XJ41 based on the XJ-S chassis could be viable, and he brought in relatively unknown designer Ian Callum to develop the theme. He put the proposition directly to Jaguar, and got a 'no' vote.

Ford, however, was keen to develop a new Aston Martin, and Walkinshaw was encouraged to develop the theme. The result was the DB7, launched in September 1994, causing a storm.

The DB7 was not an Aston in the true tradition. Apart from its XJ-S floorpan, the engine was also Jaguar-derived. Its 3239cc version, the AJ6 all-aluminium twin-cam engine was fitted with a bespoke cam and head. It was mated to an Eaton supercharger, driven directly from the engine.

The new car wasn't built at Aston's Newport Pagnell shrine but a factory, yes a mere factory, at Bloxham. Last tenant, the Jaguar XJ220.

The Aston's largely composite body was partially, though not completely, handbuilt. In all, 57% of the car was unique to Aston, though there were some Ford parts and, as commentators at the time gleefully stated, Mazda door handles.

The overall price of just over £80,000 launched Aston Martin to a new if still affluent audience.

Even the most cynical Jaguar enthusiast would have to admit that Ford's takeover had transformed the company and its attitude, and the XK8 would be the first fruit of this.

The new car had to be every inch a Jaguar. Four full-size clay models were looked at by three studios – Ford at Dearborn and Ghia in Turin each submitting one, and two coming from Jaguar's own design facility at Whitley.

Whitley's submission for an evocative, yet traditional car won the battle, being popular both with Ford and Jaguar bosses and in customer research. This was used as the basis for the car's basic design, which was approved in October 1992. The whole project got the go ahead in December 1993.

By the time the XK8 was launched in 1996, £400m had been invested in the new car, which would be the first home of Jaguar's new all aluminium AJ-V8 engine.

An adapted XJ-S floorpan was included to save costs, but given that car's continuing excellence, despite its age, this was the correct decision.

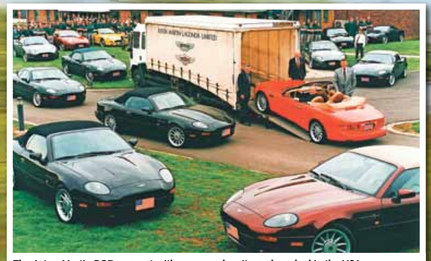
At £48,000, more than £30,000 cheaper than a DB7, the 290bhp 4.0-litre Jaguar XK8 was heralded as an heir to the E-type's throne. When the supercharged XKR derivative was launched, it seemed Jaguar could do no wrong.

Back to the Aston. By 1999, a 6.0-litre V12 had been developed. This model, dubbed the Vantage, would eventually become the sole model in the DB7 range, and lasted until the car's demise in 2004. A specially-bodied Zagato variant was the DB7's swansong. By this time, 2449 six-cylinder-engined cars had been made, with a further 4444 V12s and 100 Zagatos.

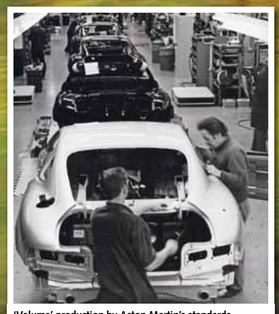
When the new X350 XJ saloon was launched in 2003, the V8 was upped from 4.0- to 4.2-litres and adopted across the range. This was combined with a facelift, which gave the then seven-year-old XK the ability to keep attracting buyers until its replacement in 2006. By then, just over 90,000 XK derivatives had been produced – almost 13 to every single Aston. Both cars directly influenced the ranges which followed, and both marques would have very different images today had the DB7 and XK8 not been produced.

Pale colours and warm walnut entice the driver behind the wheel. Slab-like facia, but lovely looking, thanks to wood.

In the Aston it's a game of 'Spot the borrowed bits!'



The Aston Martin DB7 was met with success when it was launched in the USA.



'Volume' production by Aston Martin's standards.

The Jaguar XJ41 was the basis for the Aston Martin DB7.

Two interpretations of a similar theme. But is the 20 year old Aston better than Jaguar's first V8?

To think, these spokes were covered up on earlier DB7s.

Big wheels, smooth ride, thanks to CATS damping system.

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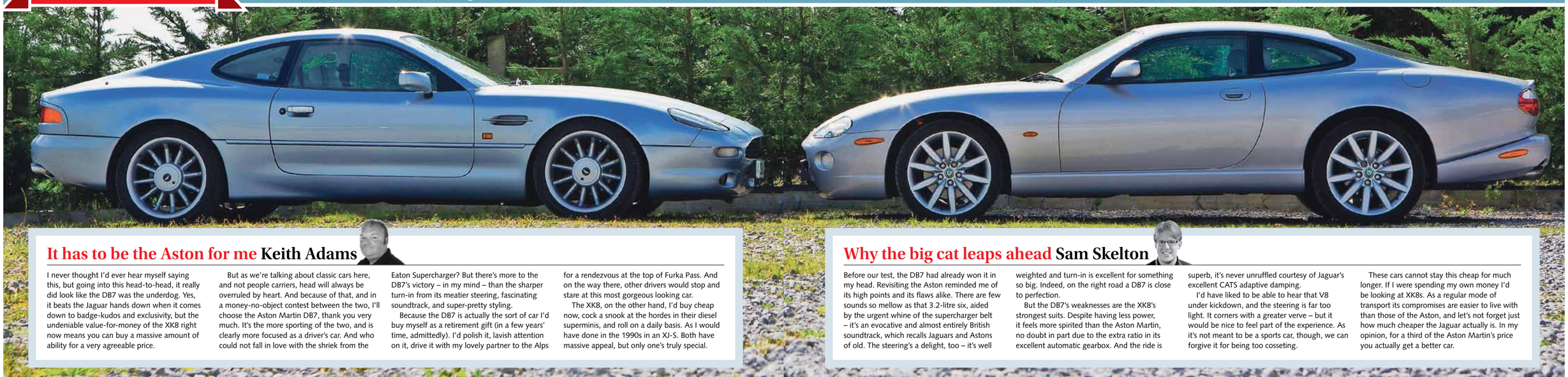

It has to be the Aston for me Keith Adams

I never thought I'd ever hear myself saying this, but going into this head-to-head, it really did look like the DB7 was the underdog. Yes, it beats the Jaguar hands down when it comes down to badge-kudos and exclusivity, but the undeniable value-for-money of the XK8 right now means you can buy a massive amount of ability for a very agreeable price.

But as we're talking about classic cars here, and not people carriers, head will always be overruled by heart. And because of that, and in a money-no-object contest between the two, I'll choose the Aston Martin DB7, thank you very much. It's the more sporting of the two, and is clearly more focused as a driver's car. And who could not fall in love with the shriek from the Eaton Supercharger? But there's more to the DB7's victory – in my mind – than the sharper turn-in from its meatier steering, fascinating soundtrack, and super-pretty styling.

Because the DB7 is actually the sort of car I'd buy myself as a retirement gift (in a few years' time, admittedly). I'd polish it, lavish attention on it, drive it with my lovely partner to the Alps for a rendezvous at the top of Furka Pass. And on the way there, other drivers would stop and stare at this most gorgeous looking car.

The XK8, on the other hand, I'd buy cheap now, cock a snook at the hordes in their diesel superminis, and roll on a daily basis. As I would have done in the 1990s in an XJ-S. Both have massive appeal, but only one's truly special.

Why the big cat leaps ahead Sam Skelton

Before our test, the DB7 had already won it in my head. Revisiting the Aston reminded me of its high points and its flaws alike. There are few sounds so mellow as that 3.2-litre six, aided by the urgent whine of the supercharger belt – it's an evocative and almost entirely British soundtrack, which recalls Jaguars and Astons of old. The steering's a delight, too – it's well weighted and turn-in is excellent for something so big. Indeed, on the right road a DB7 is close to perfection.

But the DB7's weaknesses are the XK8's strongest suits. Despite having less power, it feels more spirited than the Aston Martin, no doubt in part due to the extra ratio in its excellent automatic gearbox. And the ride is superb, it's never unruffled courtesy of Jaguar's excellent CATS adaptive damping.

I'd have liked to be able to hear that V8 under kickdown, and the steering is far too light. It corners with a greater verve – but it would be nice to feel part of the experience. As it's not meant to be a sports car, though, we can forgive it for being too cosseting.

These cars cannot stay this cheap for much longer. If I were spending my own money I'd be looking at XK8s. As a regular mode of transport its compromises are easier to live with than those of the Aston, and let's not forget just how much cheaper the Jaguar actually is. In my opinion, for a third of the Aston Martin's price you actually get a better car.

On the road

Both the Aston and Jaguar look wonderful, and you are aching for the sun to settle down into the soft light that accentuates their every curve. Put together, it's obvious that the cars haven't an outer panel in common.

The Aston is every bit as beautiful as its illustrious forebears, with the nose echoing that of an updated DB5, and the front wing air intakes and well – it's difficult not to lapse into clichés, or just advise anyone to look at the photos.

The Jaguar is not far behind though style-wise and again is every bit worthy of its prestigious badge. Where the Aston has a sporty bulkiness about it, the Jaguar is low, sleek and prowling. The styling of both cars really is timeless.

It's good sit in both cars to soak up their atmosphere before actually driving them. The Aston cabin gently rolls itself around you as you sink into, smell and savour its Connolly leather. The steering wheel and column feel chunky and the instruments are logically and attractively laid out.

The Jaguar feels generally more spacious of the two, and there's a lovely expanse of polished timber accommodating the instruments. The dashboard is higher than in the Aston, and looking out over the bonnet bulge makes you feel you could almost be in a luxuriously appointed D-type.

At last, the chance to sample both the cars, and it has to be the Aston first. Our test car has the four-speed auto gearbox complete with supercharger and cruise control.

Ease it into drive and all seems restrained with a refined mild thump until around 2000rpm, when madness is let loose. The engine stops ticking and starts howling and the supercharger kicks in with a whoosh that somehow manages to knife your soul yet sounds refined, the various gauges seem to go haywire and suddenly you see why these cars were renowned for their phenomenal torque curve – 360lb ft at just 3000rpm.

The four-speed gearbox gobbles all this power greedily, while the suspension remains unflustered.

The suspension is obviously much refined from its XJ-S underpinnings. Point the car anywhere and even you've been egged on to take the tightest corner much quicker than you dare, the car just copes with the slightest hint of body roll and the steering well weighted, seeming to feel firmer the more quickly you drive.

You really would need to be on a race track to hit this car's limits and surely even then it would be easy to stay under control. The brakes are confidence-inspiring, and well up to the job – if the ABS is playing its part, you'd never know. The ride is indecently good too, soaking up the nastiest surfaces with no wallow or jostle.

Now to the XK8 – it is going to have to be very good to make its mark here. Never assume anything, as they say.

The two cars have similar top power outputs, the Jaguar managing 300bhp at 6000 rpm and the Aston 317bhp at 5500rpm, but the XK8's five-speed J-gate automatic gearbox makes the most of the power and torque on tap, whereas the Aston's gearbox tries to hide some of it.

There's no supercharger on our test XK8, but the car hits almost projectile-like qualities on kickdown, and there's a satisfying roar from the engine.

The cars have similar top speeds too, the Jaguar lagging 2mph behind at 155mph, and the XK8 is just beginning to show its awesome grand touring ability at the UK's frutratingly low legal limit.

The XK8's ride is definitely softer and even less ruffling that that of the Aston's, as you'd expect. The Jaguar's steering feels lighter and maybe more controlled, but is still relatively communicative.

Left or right? Jaguar vs Aston Martin is a tough choice that divides opinions.

INVESTMENT

With a bit of haggling you could land a fair DB7 for £15,000. £20-25,000 should buy the best. If we're honest, we'll never get the chance to buy an Aston so cheaply again – end of story! They'd been in the doldrums from the late-2000s until a couple of years ago, when buyers finally began to cotton to the fact that leggy DB7s were getting very close to dropping to the £10K mark. Needless to say in today's classic-friendly market, they've finally began to pick up and enjoy that long overdue price-rise.

We're hearing reports that the XK's time could be soon, allthough right now, they're as low as they're going to get. These Jaguars are one of the ultimate classic bargains – they're now cheaper than the XJ-S they replaced, and £5000 will buy a very nice early example, with less being an option if you're brave, and don't mind getting your hands dirty. This situation can't last.

Convertibles attract a price premium in both cases – 25-30% for the Jag, nearer to 40% for the Aston Martin. Expect the gap to widen.

Spotted on ClassicCarsForSale.co.uk

1999 Aston Martin DB7 Dunhill Edition. £25,950. One of 78. Brushed Aluminium Veneers, White faced instruments.

2004 Jaguar XK8. £12,995. Midnight black, service history from Grange Jaguar, Adaptive Cruise, Adaptive Damping, Brembo Brakes.

ASTON MARTIN DB7

ENGINE	3239cc/6-cyl/DOHC
POWER	317bhp@5500rpm
TORQUE	337lb ft@3000rpm
TOP SPEED	157mph
0-60MPH	6.9sec
ECONOMY	18mpg
GEARBOX	Four-speed auto
STEERING	Power-assisted rack and pinion
FRONT BRAKES	285mm ventilated discs
REAR BRAKES	295mm ventilated discs

FRONT SUSPENSION Independent, unequal length wishbones with anti dive geometry. Coils springs over telescopic dampers, anti roll bar

REAR SUSPENSION Independent wishbone with drive shaft as upper link. Longitudinal control arms, coil springs over telescopic dampers.

JAGUAR XK8

ENGINE	4196cc/V8/DOHC
POWER	300bhp@6000rpm
TORQUE	310lb ft@4100rpm
TOP SPEED	155mph
0-60MPH	6.1sec
ECONOMY	24mpg
GEARBOX	Five-speed auto
STEERING	Power-assisted rack and pinion
FRONT BRAKES	325mm ventilated discs
REAR BRAKES	305mm ventilated discs

FRONT SUSPENSION Unequal length wishbones, coil springs and telescopic dampers. Optional CATS

REAR SUSPENSION Unequal length wishbones, coil springs and telescopic dampers. Optional CATS adaptive damping system.

Verdict

How to choose? How to choose? Despite looking outwardly similar, these cars have surprisingly different characters. The DB7 is more driver-focused, and the XK8 is softer, more cossetting.

The Aston Martin is obviously going to be the car in theory you'd love the most, with its barely restrained performance, awesome torque band and more involving feel. It's a worthy candidate for the Aston Martin name, too, though it does lack the slightly edgy air of earlier classic DBs. It's more George Lazenby than Sean Connery if you really want a Bond comparison. The Jaguar is still beautiful, feels more luxurious and maybe it's not something we want to admit, but it's a car that blends into a themic whole more succinctly than the Aston.

Both cars soak up huge distances, that goes without saying, but unless you're negotiating hundreds of miles of winding Alpine roads, the XK8 clearly wins as a grand tourer.

Its refined friendly character is still fun and exciting at the times you really want to start pushing it like a sports car, but calms down for the drive home from work. And that means it would win everyone over.

Exclusivity is the Aston's only real massive victory over the Jaguar, so why not go XK8 for a third of the price?