



The OTHER XJR-9

Think XJR-9, think 1988 Le Mans 24 Hours winner. But it wasn't the end of Jaguar's endurance story. Octane drives the one that won at Daytona – two years later

WORDS Richard Meaden / PHOTOGRAPHY Paul Harmer

W

WHEN YOU THINK of Jaguar's Group C efforts, two things spring to mind: Le Mans and that iconic purple-and-white Silk Cut livery. But there's another tale of 24-hour glory. One forged on Daytona's fearsome banking and draped in white, red and green. Jaguar's brief yet brilliant period of imperious domination at the Daytona 24 Hours might be less widely celebrated, but it's a no-less-significant success. And this car sits right at the heart of it.

The white wedge you're no doubt drooling over now is chassis XJR-9 no 388: one of three cars that ran in IMSA, and one of two cars created expressly for Jaguar's US campaign by TWR. The first – chassis no 188 – was built from a World Sports Car Championship car used in the 1986 season. Though it saw race action in the US, its primary role was that of the team's development car and spare. The first of the pure-bred IMSA cars – chassis no 288 – is a hero in its own right, having scored Jaguar's debut Daytona 24 Hours win in 1988 and finishing second in 1990. However, far from being mothballed and parked in a museum, this celebrated piece of racing history was withdrawn from its IMSA campaign in the spring of 1990 to be converted to World Sports Car specification, re-liveried in Silk Cut colours and entered for that year's Le Mans 24 Hours. A race it would ultimately go on to win...

That leaves XJR-9 no 388: the sole IMSA car to remain unchanged since Jaguar's spectacular Stateside adventure (it was converted from XJR-9 to XJR-12 spec for Daytona). With a pair of consecutive podiums in the Sebring 12 Hours (second in 1989, third in 1990) and a fistful of other IMSA podiums between 1988 and 1990 to supplement its Daytona glories, it ranks alongside its sister car as the single most significant Jaguar sports prototype of all time.

Clockwise from right
Author Meaden edges his way onto a damp Brands Hatch pitlane; ready for some test laps; chatting with Jaguar racing legend and winner at Daytona and Le Mans Andy Wallace; Wallace (with characteristic moustache) and the victorious Jaguar team at Daytona, back in 1990.

For race fans of a certain age there's something incredibly evocative about any car from the Group C era, but examples of Jaguar's Tony Southgate-designed XJR series are more charismatic than most. Steeped in success and patriotic fervour, capable of immense speeds and spoken of in reverential tones by all who raced them, they are the epitome of a golden age in endurance racing. Its Castrol livery might not conform to the image your mind's eye conjures, but chassis no 388 is no exception.

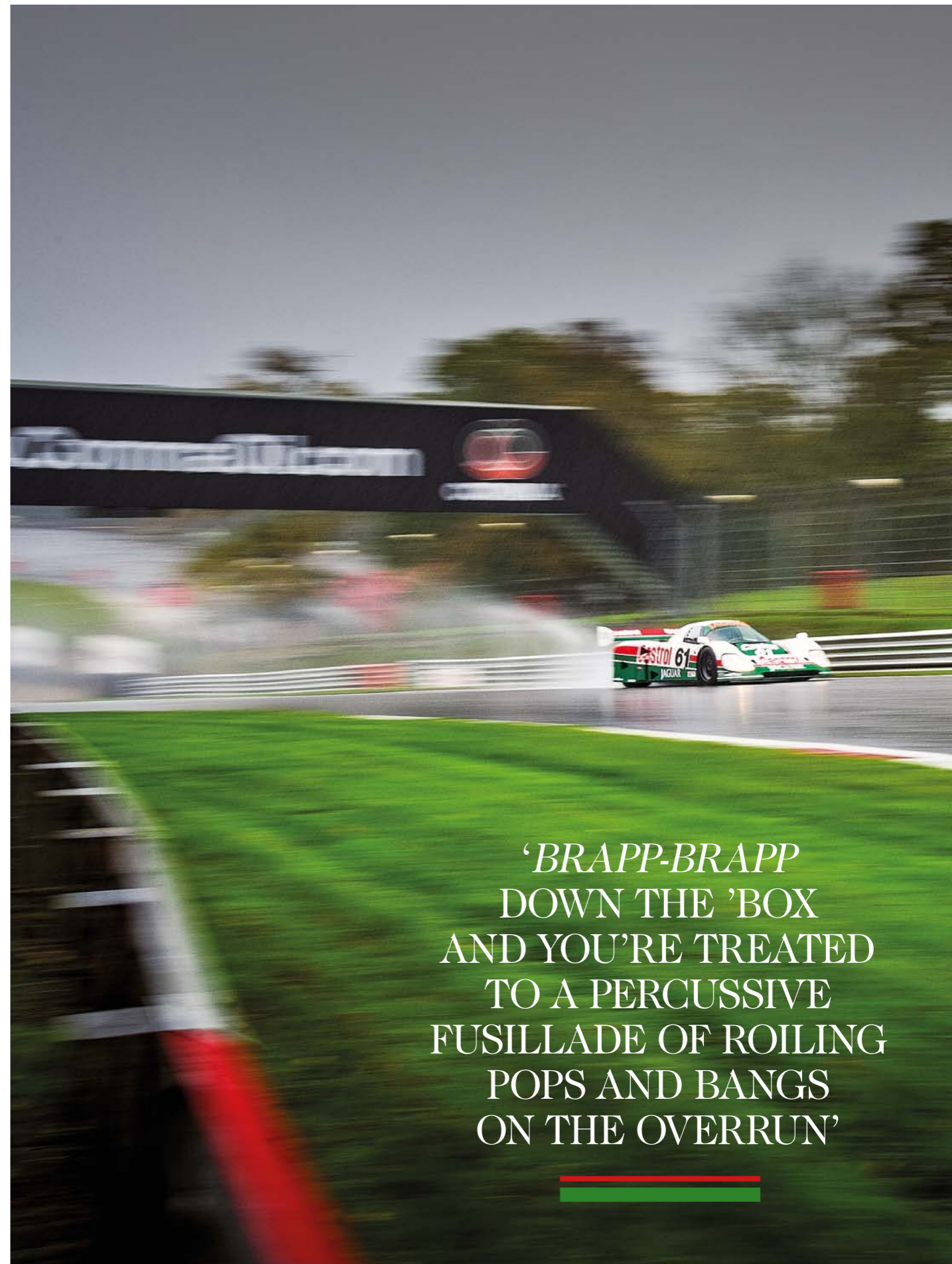
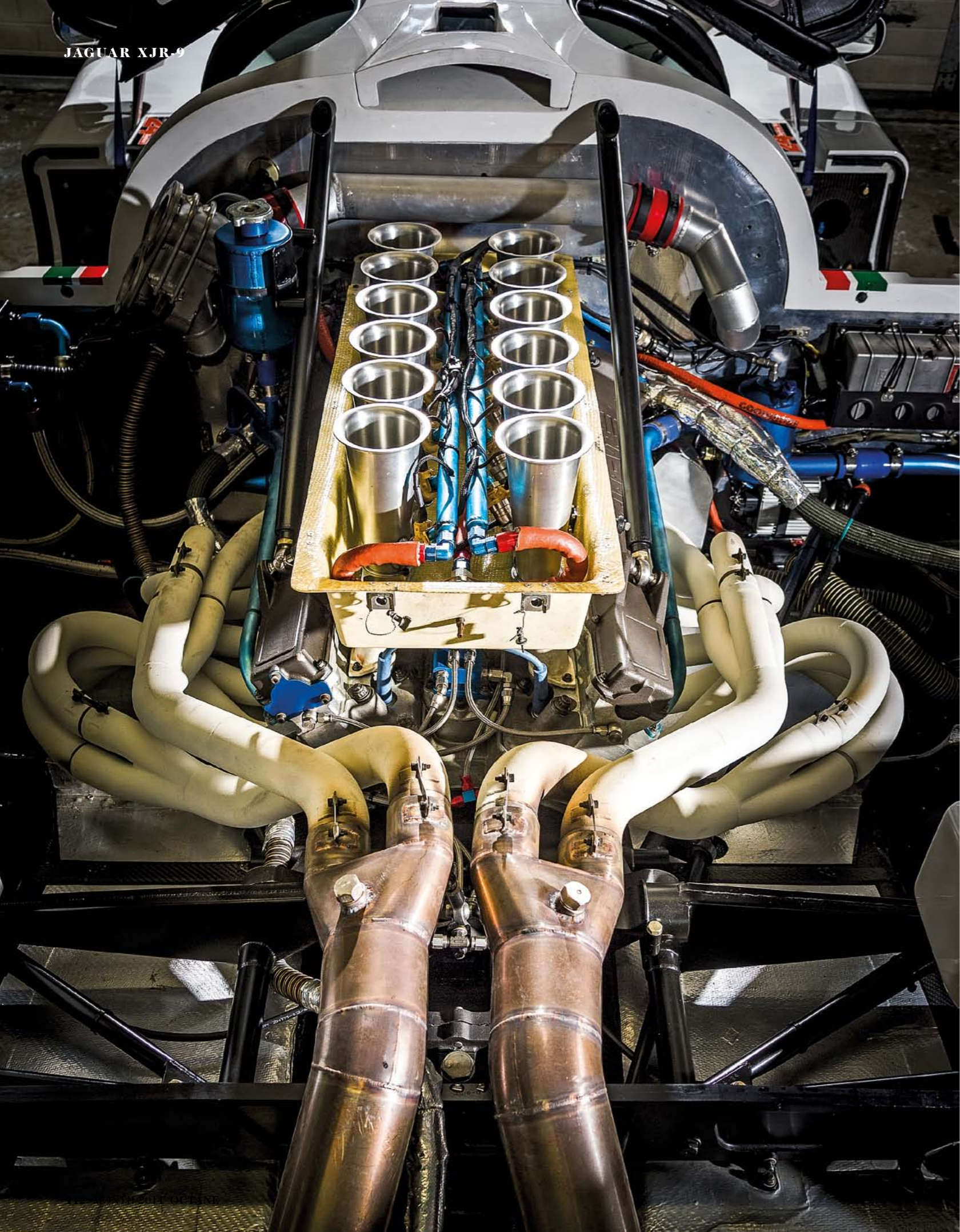
A breathtaking – and breathtakingly beautiful – machine, it sits before you in the pit garage, silent and brooding, commanding your awe-struck attention. Impossibly low and wide, with vast underfloor venturi tunnels running the length of the car before rising up to emerge beneath the massive rear wing like some latter-day Roman viaduct, it's as explicit an expression of aerodynamics and downforce as you're ever likely to see.

After taking part in the Daytona 24 Hours test in 1991, no 388 was unceremoniously retired from active service as Jaguar's V12 era finally came to an end. Since then it has been the star of a number of car collections, most recently in the custody of Group C addict Henry Pearman, who has chosen the 25th anniversary of its Daytona win to offer no 388 for auction at RM's Amelia Island sale (Florida, USA, 14 March 2015). Perhaps because of its historical significance it hasn't been raced since its retirement, but it has been recently treated to a total restoration and rebuild by the acknowledged experts, Lanzante Motorsport. As such it is absolutely perfect. And I mean pristine in every way, just as it would have been a quarter-century ago at Daytona, when presented for pre-race scrutineering.

To complete the timewarp effect I've invited Le Mans, Daytona and Sebring winner Andy Wallace along to have a look at his former steed, and to share some reminiscences from the most successful 24 hours of no 388's brilliant career. Shorn of his trademark 'tache, Wallace is no longer in full Daytona specification, but low-drag facial set-up aside it's obvious from the sparkle in his eyes that the sight of the Castrol-liveried Jag has transported him straight back to Florida and the scene of his 'other' great 24-hours win with Jaguar. Even now, the memories it evokes are powerful and profound:

'Wow, it looks fantastic, doesn't it? It's funny, but when you're there, in the moment, so to speak, you're completely focused on getting the best from yourself, the team and the car. It's not that you're oblivious to the significance of what you're a part of, but it's your job.' With →





*'BRAPP-BRAPP
DOWN THE 'BOX
AND YOU'RE TREATED
TO A PERCUSSIVE
FUSILLADE OF ROILING
POPS AND BANGS
ON THE OVERRUN'*



'I'M NOT SURE I'VE DRIVEN ANOTHER CAR THAT MAKES YOU SO AT-ONE WITH ITS RESPONSES'

apparent understatement, he adds: 'The older I get, the more I appreciate how special those days – and these cars – were.'

'1989 was my first visit to Daytona. In those days we didn't have simulators, so you'd try to get hold of some in-car video or talk to someone who'd raced there before. I was sharing with Jan Lammers – with whom I'd won Le Mans a few years before – and he had a lot of Daytona experience so was very helpful.

'The biggest shock was how bumpy the surface was. They've re-surfaced it now, but back then it was *really* bumpy, largely from where the NASCARs had pounded round and round and round and pulverised the tarmac. The Jag moved around from bump to bump and even started "panting" [a phenomenon peculiar to high-downforce cars] at certain points, particularly on the section of banking that ran over the entrance tunnel. The banking was easily flat-out in terms of grip, but the bumps meant you really had to hang onto it. The constant need to make steering corrections and the sheer weight of the steering at 200mph made it hard work.'

And that's not all. 'The other thing peculiar to Daytona is the traffic. At Le Mans you had 55 cars on an 8.5-mile circuit, but at Daytona you had the same number of cars on a 3.5-mile lap, so it was very, very busy. Mentally and physically I'd say it was a tougher race than Le Mans. There were lots of different classes and a much bigger speed differential on the banking, so while in theory the slower guys stayed low and we'd go round the top of them, it wasn't quite that simple.

'There are two points where you join the banking from the infield, and in both those places all the cars were thrown out wide towards the wall until the angle of the banking caught you. In the Jags we couldn't afford to waste time waiting for the slower cars to settle back down at the base of the banking, so we'd end up going by them every which way. Sometimes you'd get a driver who'd be frozen like a rabbit in your headlights, desperate to move down the banking, but unable to because there were quicker cars hammering by either side of them. If you were racing someone for position you'd regularly find yourself cutting up and down the banking, zig-zagging through the traffic like a lunatic.

'There were no team orders within the Jaguar team so we really went at it hammer and tongs. I still remember one fantastic sequence of laps when I was battling with Martin Brundle, who was in the sister car. He still had his Formula 1 head on, and we were racing each other nose-to-tail through the traffic. We got round the banking to the point known as NASCAR 3-4 and there, right in the middle, were three battling Porsches, blocking the track. Martin obviously thought "Well, I've got so much momentum I'm damned if I'm going to lift", so he veered left and crashed down off the banking in a massive shower of sparks, passed the Porsches on the apron [the flat section of track that runs around the base of the banked oval], then smashed right back up onto the bowl in another huge shower of sparks.

'I can remember sitting there thinking "Jesus, that's impressive!" and I even toyed with the idea of following him for a split second, but in the end I decided to be a little more cautious. After a very short while a gap opened up and I shot by the Porsches and he was still just ahead of me. Then lo and behold he got wrong-

sidied by two more cars as we crossed the start/finish line and I went by him and the slower cars! The traffic was a lottery, but you couldn't fight it for 24 hours. I tried to think of the car and take calculated risks.'

Those calculations would extend to strategy too. 'A tank of fuel would last around an hour. We'd change tyres at every fuel stop, more due to concerns over carcass durability than any degradation in grip. The loadings on the banking were horrendous. The weather also posed its own challenges. Daytona 24 Hours is run in January, so at night it wasn't uncommon for the overnight temperature to drop very close to freezing, but during the day it could get close to 30°C, which meant it got stinking hot in the car. We'd do double stints between driver changes. That was more than enough, believe me.

'It seems mad to think about it now, but there were no speed limits in the pitlane. In practice sessions we trained at coming straight off down the banking and in, no messing. TWR always had the very last pit, so at Daytona – which had a pitlane a bit like a motorway – we'd peel off the banking at just over 200mph, then spear down the slope and into the pitlane entry doing 185 and some. We'd actually be accelerating as we went by the other pits, eyes out on stalks looking for the lollipop with our team name and car number on it and desperately trying to judge our braking so we'd cut across the three lanes of the pitlane and just stop in time. It was only because we'd been perfecting this high-speed kamikaze run in the practice sessions that the other cars realised the nutters in the Jags were coming through the pits at almost full speed! Once we'd screeched to a halt we'd have just 12 seconds to jump out and strap the next driver in before the team were ready to send the car back out. The stops were as full-on as the race.'

AFTER SUCH TALES of derring-do, when the time comes for me to slide down into the very same seat, reach out to grasp the same steering wheel and drive this most significant of racing Jaguars, there's little point in attempting any half-baked heroics. To be perfectly honest, right up until the moment I feel the surprisingly progressive clutch find purchase against the big V12's flywheel and propel us along the Brands Hatch pitlane, I'm expecting Henry Pearman to come to his senses, run out in front of the car and shout: 'Stop this madness!' That he doesn't is testament to boundless generosity, a horizontally laidback attitude and – presumably – a cast-iron insurance policy.

The cockpit is snug, but perfectly laid out. The view through the huge bubble-screen is straight from *Lap of the Gods* (on something called VHS. Look it up, kids). The carbonfibre chassis is immensely reassuring and much more robust in the event of an accident than the more normal aluminium honeycomb tubs of the period. Big analogue dials present you with all the V12's vital signs; well-spaced and clearly labelled toggle switches are easy to flick in gloved hands, though I suspect they were still tricky to find while rattling round Daytona's bumpy saucer. On your right sprouts the gearlever, which feels weighty but beautifully precise as you take it on a dry run through the dogleg five-speed H-pattern gate.

Rain has been hammering down all morning, so these are far from ideal conditions to have your first taste of any Group C car, least of all one with such history. Yet as →

Facing page, clockwise from top left
The hot seat, which probably feels rather like strapping yourself to a missile; wet Brands Hatch corners mean you take time to learn the XJR-9's reactions – which, thankfully, are transparent; at Daytona, the scene of that fabled 1990 victory.



**Left**

The ex-Wallace Daytona car was converted to XJR-12 spec during its illustrious racing career. The 'R' is especially pertinent when you take a look inside the cockpit, which is rather less luxurious than that of the Jaguar's stablemate XJ12.

Wallace and Pearman attest, no 388 is indeed a pussycat, at least when it comes to making your first few tense and tentative laps. Of course, there's a world of difference between merely driving and really *driving* a car like this, but the fact it appears to steer, stop, change gear and direction without any malice or tricks is hugely reassuring.

I'm not sure I've ever driven another car – race or road – that makes you feel so comfortable or at-one with its responses. This is a wholly analogue car: three pedals and a gearstick to make that gargantuan naturally aspirated V12 engine sing; a simple and surprisingly large three-spoke steering wheel to work the unassisted rack; and the palms of your hands, balls of your feet and clenched cheeks of your arse to gauge just how much to ask from the huge Dunlop wets in these treacherously slippery conditions. You'll never feel more connected to a car.

At first it's all rather overwhelming. The Brands Hatch Indy circuit might be small, but it's also sinuous (even the straights are curved!) and contorted, with unsettling camber changes. Even at sensible speeds you're constantly busy. The sensory bombardment is intimidating and intoxicating, the weight of responsibility crushing, yet the knowledge you've been let loose in such an iconic car sets your spirits soaring in line with your heartrate.

Laps don't last long on the Indy circuit, even in the pouring rain, but every time the pit buildings skim though my peripheral vision I feel a little more confident to keep the throttle pinned that little bit longer on the charge towards Paddock Hill. Speed gets those monster venturi tunnels working, which in turn brings stability and a fleeting sense of security, but no sooner are you empowered to stretch the V12 than you're left with a craving for more and more exposure to this XJR-9's wondrous engine. It really does have a boundless sense of power.

The noise is totally seductive, at once silken and serrated, an X-rated soundtrack of aural sex and sonic violence. It might not have the torque of its 7.0-litre Le Mans brother, but it still pulls like a train from modest revs. Then, when you finally hit the brakes and *brapp-brapp* down the 'box, you're treated to a percussive fusillade of roiling pops and bangs on the overrun. At first I think there's something loose thumping on the floor, but then the penny drops and I realise it's the V12's high-octane reflux thumping and gurgling through the exhaust system.

Despite the ever-present fear of pirouetting into the gravel (or Armco), the XJR-9 gives you some feel to work with, so while you know you're in over your head you've got just enough tactile feedback to make an educated guess as to how hard you can squeeze on the throttle or brake pedal. Paddock Hill and Druids are surprisingly grippy, but the exit from Graham Hill Bend and the endless arc of McLaren and Clearways are horribly slippery, the former allowing you to carry some speed on turn-in, but punishing a greedy right foot with wheelspin as apex cedes to exit, the latter making you catch your breath mid-corner with a sudden smear of understeer if you ask too much from the XJR-9's front-end. It should feel like knife-edge stuff, but so lucid are the Jag's channels of communication that you never feel like you're taking an ill-advised leap of faith. Even when you sense the rear wheels breaking traction along the Cooper Straight a little voice tells you to trust in the honesty of the car and the increasingly firm hand of downforce that's pushing you into the track surface as speed builds.

I'm not sure cold running water is an industry-standard *g* sensor but, once I feel confident enough to carry some speed through Clearways, a steady stream of chilled rainwater rushes through the top of the door and onto my gloved right hand. After ten minutes enough water has run down my arm and accumulated on the broad sill of the carbon tub that water begins to slosh into my seat. More cold water is poured on my run when I have a sedate half-spin on the exit of Graham Hill Bend. It all →




1988 JAGUAR XJR-9 IMSA

ENGINE 5996cc V12, SOHC per bank, Bosch fuel injection, Zytek engine management **POWER** 670bhp @ 7500rpm
TRANSMISSION Five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **STEERING** Rack and pinion, unassisted
SUSPENSION Front: double wishbones, pushrod-actuated coil springs and telescopic dampers.
Rear: magnesium uprights, titanium coil springs over dampers **BRAKES** Vented carbon discs
WEIGHT c850kg **PERFORMANCE** Top speed 245mph (depending on gearing)

happens pretty slowly – slow enough for me to sense the wheelspin build, apply corrective lock and balance the throttle – but, with so much water on the track and so little grip to lean on, the pendulum effect of that hefty V12 takes over and the tail continues to rotate. Time to call it a day, methinks.

I can't tell you how much I wish I could have experienced the magical, humbling sensation of hot slicks and boundless downforce, but still the opportunity to sample this fabulous car is a memory to cherish. We can all dream of summoning Wallace levels of talent and bravery, but the honest truth is that this car gives generously from the moment you flick the ignition and fuel pump toggles and spark its peerless V12 into life.

I could quite happily park no 388 in my living room, but a sedentary life would be shameful for such a majestic, mighty machine. I for one hope that whoever places the winning bid at Amelia Island (for an estimated sum somewhere in excess of £3 million) does so with a preparedness to gird their loins and pledge every scrap of spare time to learn its ways and explore its near-infinite performance. To do anything less would be to squander the privilege of driving one of the most significant Jaguar racers of them all. Having had the briefest taste of what no 388 has to offer, that would be a travesty. 

THANKS TO RM Auctions, www.rmuctions.com; and Henry Pearman of Historic Classics, email sales@historicgroup.com.