

# THE Newsletter of the **International Jaguar 'S'-TYPE** Register **Remembering ... John Fitch**



By David N. Reilly

John Cooper Fitch (August 4, 1917 – October 31, 2012) was, to my mind, the last of the classic American race car drivers. In many ways he was a renaissance man as he was an amateur sailor, war hero, racing driver, inventor, car designer/manufacturer, writer and entrepreneur. He was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, and his stepfather was an executive with the Stutz Motor Company. He saw the last race at Brooklands race track, in England, before World War 2 broke out, a track that we know well as we lived less than a mile from it in 1976-78 and spent many days there clearing the track and attending reunion events. We are still members of the Brooklands Society (<http://www.brooklands.org.uk/>).

He tried to join the Royal Air Force, but was refused, so returned to the USA and joined the US Army Air Corps, flying first in North Africa. Flying a P-51 Mustang from England, he was one of the few pilots to shoot down a Messerschmitt Me 262 jet fighter. Two months before the end of the war, he was shot down himself and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner.

While there are many tributes, memoriam and obituaries on the Internet, we would suggest you read the one published by *The Telegraph* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/sport-obituaries/9654484/John-Fitch.html>.

Why do I remember John Fitch? There are more reasons than I will mention here, but the primary ones are: First—it is his fault; second—he was one of the great Jaguar racers; and third I was able to spend some time with him and increase my love for the early days.

I think it was John Fitch who set my motoring direction. I still have *Road & Track* magazines from the late 1940s and early '50s in which I had read of his races in an MG-TC on the East coast – Watkins Glen, Bridgehampton, Thompson Connecticut, Linden, New Jersey. Locally (in central

Washington state, 3000 mile away), the car-crazy youth of my small town were encouraged by an ex-midget racer, Warren Gibbons. He started a car club for every kind of car: hot rods, sports cars, vintage cars and 'ordinary cars'. My friends and I drove throughout the state to see drags, hill climbs, and sports car races (most all on airports in those days) .... And with Warren's support, my parents were persuaded to let me buy a 'foreign car' and, because of John Fitch, it had to be an MG-TC (See '48 – A TC Remembered on page 2).

After his TC, John Fitch built a special powered by a Ford V8-60 as run in midgets of that era and then teamed with illustrator Coby Whitmore to modify Whitmore's new Jaguar XK-120 into one of the first Jaguar specials (See page 3). Their racing results caught the eye of Briggs Cunningham, millionaire America's Cup yacht racer, who was now building his own cars for sports car racing. This led to John racing a Cunningham C2-R at Le Mans in 1951 (18th overall, first in class), and the rest, as they say, is history. John raced all of the Cunningham cars, as well as Brigg's Porsches, Ferraris and Mercedes Benz. This led to him being invited to join the Mercedes factory team, the first American to get this honour. Fitch

continued to race the Fitch-Whitmore Jaguar special until about 1953. This car was sold for US\$403,000 at Bonhams' Greenwich Concours d'Elegance auction in 2009.

In 1955 John Fitch was sharing a Mercedes 300-SLR at Le Mans with Pierre



This writer with his MG-TC in 1957.

Levegh. Levegh was involved in a horrendous crash which killed over 80 spectators and Mercedes retired from motor racing. John Fitch joined Chevrolet to lead the effort to make the Corvette a serious contender in racing before rejoining the Cunningham team during the 1960s.

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## a TC remembered

by DAVID N. REILLY

The other morning while I was driving to work, sitting complacently in the arm-chair-like comfort of my 3.8 'S' Jag, cushioned by the all-independent suspension, gently gripping the hand carved Nardi steering wheel, and listening to Louis Rawls on the 8-track stereo, I saw an MG rapidly entering the Northern State Parkway from a cloverleaf. Ordinarily this scene would not elicit more than a passing glance, but as I watched the rear view I knew this was a REAL MG. It wasn't one of the midgets that can hardly be distinguished from Sprites, nor was it the 'B' with its soft suspension and roll-up windows. This MG was a TC! The nineteen inch wire wheels are a giveaway to anyone, but we old-timers can recognize the vertical lines and high flared fenders. I slowed some and, as it passed, noticed the driver was a boy of about seventeen. He sat bolt upright bouncing along on the coal cart suspension with the wind blowing his hair and billowing out his parka. As the jaunty, near upright, spare tire and slab gas tank went ahead, I followed and mentally returned to a fall day in 1954.

Three of us, sixteen year olds, had taken Jerry's Edelbrock equipped '48 Plymouth to Seattle to see the sports car races. In those days the hotbeds of sports cars were still New England and Southern California. We didn't get to see many foreign cars in the wilds of Washington, and would drive quite a distance to see real racers like the Cad-Allard of Tom Carstens and Lew Florence's Cooper Formula III cars. The races were terrific and the 500 cc Cooper had finished in front of the Allard.

While we were having a hamburger after the races, one of us bought a Sunday paper and we all poured over the classifieds and there it was: 1948 MG TC, red, runs well, call after 6 p.m.

It was one minute after six when I called and received an address in the University district. Oh, the dreams and plans that were tossed around during our drive across town. As we drew near our destination the

talk trailed off and the car was completely silent. Jerry stopped and we were there. Nobody said a word as I jumped out and approached one of those garages they have in older hilly areas, set into the side of the hill with only the doors exposed. I wiped the dirt from the window pane and peered into the darkness. It was beautiful!

We trooped up to the house and could hardly contain ourselves during the discussions preliminary to opening the garage. We swarmed over, under, and in it, carefully examining the knock-off hubs, the large tachometer, the twin SU carburetors, the tool box behind the battery and compartment behind the boot for the side curtains. When we heard the wonderful sound of that 1250 cc engine, with its clattering cam followers, and throaty burble, we were in ecstasy. I couldn't believe it when the owner asked if I wanted to take it around the block, but managed some calm as I climbed in and acquainted myself with the lie of the controls of a right hand drive car. The clutch was strange, but I started without stalling. We carefully navigated around the block, hardly noticing the quarter turn play in the steering, or the king pin slop. I was sold and told the owner confidently that I would bring my father back the following weekend.

The first half of the trip home Jerry and Jim argued against it. What would I do with my old Chev? Sell it. How would I get my father's permission? I had been working on him for months showing him every reference and picture of TCs appearing in Road and Track and Sports Cars Illustrated. What about parts? There was a good dealer in Vancouver B.C. On and on. The last half of the trip was over Blewett Pass, forty-five miles of narrow switchbacks, and that was where I won my argument. The hardest part, of course, was convincing my parents, but it was accomplished on condition the Chev was sold first.

It never would have come about if Warren hadn't spent two evenings at our

house. Warren was the fellow who started our local car club. He used to drive midgets, had a limp, and walked with the aid of a cane. He was the one that wanted the club called ETC so that no car enthusiast would be left out. We had hot rods, sports cars, a Lebaron Lincoln and customs. Warren was the club. He loved TCs and it had all rubbed off onto me.

The next weekend the whole family, Mom, Dad, Sister, Grandmother and myself travelled to Seattle in the family Buick Century. Dad looked long and hard at the TC on arrival. I think he had in mind all the points Warren had told him to check because he really went over it. He found a lot of faults but, finally, took me aside and said I could go ahead and bargain. I had never felt so proud before. An agreement was reached and the title signed over. It was time to start home.

The first question was who was to ride with me? Grandma decided she would and began to climb into the wrong side, but we managed to get her into the left seat. She soon became used to swinging across the center line and either yelling "Get back" or "It's okay" and we would roar out to pass.

We were about to start up Snoqualmie Pass when the rain started. We continued awhile, but finally stopped and put up the top.

Sister wanted to ride, but Grandma was having a ball and would not give up her seat. We continued on and found out it wasn't much drier with the top up than down. It leaked so bad between the top and windscreen that it really needed a wiper inside too. The front facing doors scooped in water and a little crosswind would blow the side curtains to open a several inch gap. Grandma also took on the added duty of wiping the inside of the windscreen every few minutes. Of course, there wasn't a defroster because there wasn't even a heater. We didn't notice though. Lots of heat came up the transmission tunnel and through the fire wall. I was on top of the world.

As the pass got steeper we found the clutch would slip in fourth so we went to third. Before we had topped the mountain we had gone to second, but made it. The Buick had managed to get ahead over Snoqualmie which was pretty straight, but then came Blewett and we really made up time, downshift, brake around the hairpin, accelerate, brake, upshift, downshift, around, again and again. We stopped for coffee at a truck stop the other side and had nearly finished the first cup when the Buick rolled up. Four years of adventure had begun.

With a start I came back to the present, to my all synchro gearbox, disc brakes, weather proofing, electrically defogged rear window, double overhead cam engine, and I wonder who owned my TC now. I hoped it, too, was a young boy like the one ahead of me. He turned off at an exit and I followed. As he accelerated on up the road I watched wistfully and then returned to the Parkway as I had missed my exit by two miles and thirteen years.

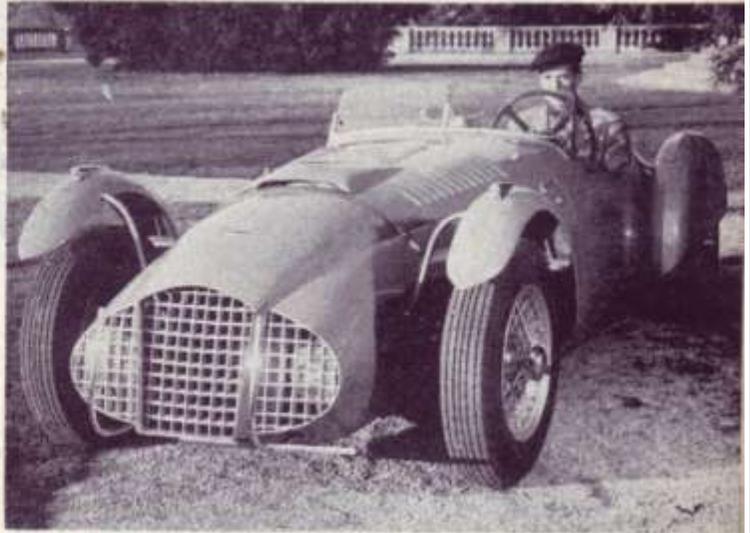
## JAGUAR SPECIALS

### Fitch-Whitmore XK-120

THE FULL TITLE of this beautiful XK-120, extensively reworked by Fitch Enterprises of White Plains, New York, is the "Fitch-Whitmore Le Mans Jaguar." Ace driver John Fitch was responsible for the technical modifications, while his perfectionist body-builder Andy Salada hand-hammered and fashioned every part of the superbly graceful lightweight body shell (800 lbs. less than stock). Owner Coby Whitmore, a rabid sports car enthusiast and himself a capable driver, is the well-known illustrator.

The transformation that was eventually to evolve into the most handsome Jaguar anywhere in the world began with a perfectly stock XK-120. Working from drawings made by John Fitch and Coby Whitmore, the meticulous "Andy" shaped out the lightweight chrome moly tubular body formers by hand, welded them in place, then started working on the paneling.

The XK's heavy cast iron brake drums were discarded in favor of a set of Al-Fin steel-lined aluminum drums shipped from England; Borrani wire wheels and hubs were installed. A special gas tank and a relocated radiator were installed to fit the new body contours. Factory modified camshafts, a dual exhaust system, and other "kit" modifications were installed, all in all producing



ROBERT JAMES WITT

around 180 bhp. The power-weight ratio is now under 12 lbs./bhp—a sizzling figure and actually an improvement on the famous XK-120C with which Walker and Whitehead swept the board in the 1951 Le Mans race.

Since the Bridgehampton race, several alterations have been made to the body, including the lowering and streamlining of the hood bulge necessary to accommodate the forward end of the camshaft train. Louvers have also been added to improve heat dissipation.

John Fitch claims its roadability, cornering, braking, and pick-up are terrific—a superb machine which bears evidence of careful planning and fine workmanship.

BILL HARKINS

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He is credited with 30 starts in Jaguars, including C-types (XKC-009) and D-types (XKD-507 & 508), The Cunningham Lightweight E-type and Lister Jaguar. He drove in Formula One for two seasons as well as over 120 races including the Mille Miglia, 16 starts in the Sebring 12-hour and 6 in the 24 Heures du Mans. His racing history and cars are well documented, so we will not repeat them here (<http://www.racesafety.com/pdf/FitchCurrent.pdf> and [http://www.racesafety.com/pdf/FitchCurrent\\_cars.pdf](http://www.racesafety.com/pdf/FitchCurrent_cars.pdf)).

Perhaps, remembering the Le Mans disaster of 1955 and his racing career was now part-time; Fitch began to devote more and more of his time and effort to automobile and motorsports safety. He originated impact absorbing systems for race tracks, invented a guardrail mounted on skids so that it can slide on impact, gradually

slowing the car and designed an anchoring system to prevent hyperextension of the neck and skull fracture in a racing crash. This was a very early forerunner of today's Head And Neck Support (HANS) device.

Fitch also worked with Jim Vaill, whose father owned land in Connecticut near John's home, to design and build a road racing circuit engineered and designed using many of his safety principles. Lime Rock Park opened in 1956 and John Fitch became its first General Manager. When USAC started sanctioning road racing in 1958, Fitch invited them to run at Lime Rock – and influenced some of their future directions (See *The Race*, page 4).

Later in the 1960s, Fitch formed a company to design and sell modifications for the Chevrolet Corvair to make it a sportier touring car. He liked the size and design of the rear-engined car in spite of Ralph Nader's condemnation of its safety (*Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the*

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*American Automobile* by Ralph Nader, published in 1965). Fitch created two versions for the car enthusiast. One was the Fitch Sprint based on the

production Corvair, with four carburetors, an extensively revised rear suspension, faster steering, better brakes and many other refinements.

The other was the Fitch Phoenix, a Corvair-based two-seat sports car. It had a body built in Italy by Intermeccanica that resembled the Corvette 'Mako Shark', a roll bar into the top which had removable roof panels that could be stowed in the trunk and a rear window that opened and closed electrically. Bulges in the front fenders contained the two spare tires. (front and rear tires were different sizes). The rear-mounted Corvair engine was modified to produce even more power than the Sprint. At 2150 lbs, a top speed of 130 mph was claimed

After the prototype was built, the Traffic Safety Act of 1966 was passed and there was uncertainty about how it would affect small manufacturers.

I first met John Fitch when he visited another safety pioneer, Bill Milliken during Volkswagen safety tests at the Cornell Aeronautical Laboratory. I had a couple of opportunities to talk racing and cars in general with John as one of my cars was being used in a crash test (See page 6, *Vehicle Safety Testing—1968*).

It became impossible for small manufacturers to build cars and planned production of 500 Fitch Phoenix was cancelled. Deposits were returned and John Fitch retained the prototype and it was his daily driver for the rest of his life.

In the late 1990s, we were living in the Boston area and were members of the Larz Anderson Museum (<http://larzanderson.org/>), home to "America's oldest car collection" and the Society of Automotive Historians, SAH (<http://www.autohistory.org/>) which we still are members of.



P1B79909DN in front of the Larz Anderson carriage house.

In 1998, John Fitch received the Kenneth Stonex Award from the Transportation Research Board of the National Academy of Sciences for his lifelong contributions to road-traffic safety. SAH invited him to

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## "The Race", Lime Rock, July 25, 1959

John Fitch not only influenced the design of Lime Rock race track, but was the first general manager. The United States Automobile Club (USAC) was formed in 1956 when the American Automobile Association (AAA) withdrew from auto racing, and their sponsorship of the Indianapolis 500-mile race, following the 1955 Le Mans disaster. While primarily an open-wheel racing organization, USAC sanctioned a road racing championship from 1958 until 1962, a fully professional alternative to the Sports Car Club of America's SCCA National Sports Car Championship. It adopted Formula Libre rules after "The Race" at Lime Rock.

John Fitch invited USAC to bring their USAC Road Racing Championship to Lime Rock. There was a disappointing turnout at the race in June 1959 (there was a small entry and John Fitch was DNF in a Lotus) so they decided to expand it to an 'International Formula Libre' race in July. This race was co-sponsored by the *New York Mirror*, who put up \$6,000 prize money. Any driver could race any car. Thirty-two entries were received and 10,000 spectators paid to see what John Fitch called, "the best race ever held by anybody, anywhere".

Rodger Ward, who had just won the Indianapolis 500 that May, was advertised as driving a Cooper Monaco – but the drive was already promised to John Fitch. So Chris Economaki, publisher of *National Speed Sport News*, convinced Ward to drive the midget that had won the eastern midget championship in 1958. A Kurtis-Kraft Offenhauser that had been built in 1946 and had competed in more than 1,000 races. It had a solid-beam front axle with a transverse front spring, no transmission, but a Hallibrand quick change rear end (which will be vital to the story), rear wheel-only brakes operated by a hand lever located outside of the car on the right side, and a 91-cubic inch alcohol-breathing Offenhauser four-cylinder engine. It was light simple, and suited to the track's smooth surface and corners that were not unlike those on a midget oval.

The race drew international star Pedro Rodriguez (Maserati 300S), as well-known US sports car drivers like George Constantine (Aston Martin DBR2), Bill Mitchell (Stingray prototype), Denise McCluggage (Porsche 550 RS), Dr. Dick Thompson (Corvette), Chuck Daigh (ex-Fangio Formula 1 Maserati 250F), Lance Reventlow (Cooper Formula 2 T43 Climax), Joe Grimaldi (Jaguar D-type XKD 523) and John Fitch (Cooper Monaco T49 Climax).

Rodger Ward in the Kurtis Midget won the pole and set a new single-lap course record 1:04.0 at an average speed of 83.5 mph but George Constantine, in arguably the world's fastest Aston Martin, and the D-type, with their multi-speed gearboxes, out-accelerated the midget on the start. Constantine led all 20 laps. Ward got past the D-type to finish 2<sup>nd</sup>, followed by Chuck Daigh, John Fitch and Pedro Rodriguez.



Rodger Ward behind the Aston Martin and Jaguar D-type at the start of Heat 1.

For the second 20 lap heat, Ward changed the gearing in quick-change rear-end and finished in front of Constantine with the same driver and car combinations in 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup>.

The final was 90 laps (60 miles) with a rolling start. Constantine again got a jump over the single-speed midget. Daigh took the lead on lap 11 and Ward went ahead at lap 15. Constantine retired. Daigh led again until lap 47 when Ward took it back and led to the end: 1st, Ward- Kurtis-Kraft Midget Offenhauser; 2nd, Daigh-Maserati 250F; 3rd, Pedro Rodriguez-Maserati 300S; 4th, John Fitch-Cooper Monaco T49 Climax.



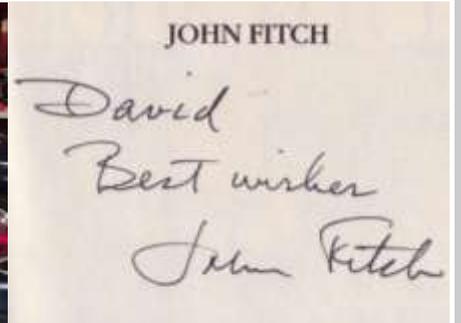
“... he showed me around the Fitch Phoenix that he had driven to Brookline, Massachusetts from his home in Connecticut.”

“... a roll bar into the top which had removable roof panels that could be stowed in the trunk ...”

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talk at their meeting at the museum.

I arrived early to the meeting in the ‘S’-type and saw a tall stately-looking gentleman standing outside smoking a pipe. It was John Fitch. We chatted and he showed me around the Fitch Phoenix that he had driven to Brookline, Massachusetts from his home in Connecticut. He also told me stories of when he and Phil Hill were Technical Advisors on the film “The Racers” (1955), filmed at the Nurburgring and Le Mans. While the film didn’t get the best reviews, it is still a classic vintage racing film to re-watch. An interesting point - John said that one of the camera cars was a Jaguar, but, alas, he didn’t have any photos of it. It was just 18 days after the film’s premiere that John was back at Le Mans to co-drive with Pierre Levegh.



John Fitch signing books at the Larz Anderson Museum

John gave a most interesting talk on racing,

ing, racing safety and after being presented with our thanks, donated his trophy for winning the General



Peron Grand Prix Buenos Aires, his first International race, March 18, 1951, in a J2 Allard-Cadillac.

This gracious gentleman was among the last to leave, signing books, showing us around the Cunningham C4-R that he had driven at Le Mans and discussing anything and everything about automobile and racing and then returning home in the car he had designed and built 33 years before.



The Cunningham C4-R on display at the Larz Anderson Museum

## Vehicle Safety Testing—1968

Television adverts showing cars being crash-tested were popular in the late '60s in the USA. Among them were Honda, Saab showing a 9-3 simulating hitting a pole and the Toyota Sienna, where young children encourage Bob (the tester) to crash more and more minivans until he runs out of them! It was not a new phenomenon, having really started about 1955 – around the time of James Dean's famous accident in his Porsche 550 Spyder.

Your Editors had some involvement in the early days of 'safety testing' in 1968 when we lived in Buffalo, New York, USA. We were consulting to Cornell Aeronautical Labs (CAL) on designing an in-flight simulator for pilots of the (then) new jet airliners.

Our 'S'-type, P1B79909DN, was "Mrs. Editor's" driver of choice as it was more comfortable for her to sit in and drive while very pregnant than the new Ford full-size station wagon was. We had never gotten around to registering our Lotus Elite (EB-1821) in the USA so it was only a 'late night excitement' driver on back roads. A Porsche-engined Myer's Manx Dune Buggy was being built but wasn't yet complete.

So "Mr. Editor's" 'daily driver' to work and to night school, pursuing an MBA, was an old VW Beetle convertible named 'Super Daisy'.

It obtained this name during a Sunday afternoon wine & cheese party when our friends decided to cover-up the rust and dents (they called it 'decorating') with hand-painted red, yellow and blue flowers. It ran like a charm, but was so dilapidated that the floorboards had been replaced with plywood (had to slow down when approaching puddles!), and when the top (hood) was down the rear body sagged so far that the doors had to be held closed with bungee cords across the cockpit. To put the top up was a two-person job. Someone had to lift the rear bumper to get the top to meet the windscreen while the other person closed the latches!



Anyway, Detroit had made a meager donation to the division of CAL where William F. Milliken, a friend of John Fitch's, and a small team of engineers were working on automobile safety. Remember that Lime Rock race course was designed in 1956 by Jim Vaill, the son of the landowner, John Fitch and a team from Cornell Aeronautical Labs. Lime Rock was the first road racing track to be engineered and designed using scientific and highway-safety principles.

Bill Milliken and I had similar backgrounds in engineering and sports car racing. He had been sports car driver and pioneer of the SCCA, was an expert on vehicle dynamics and then headed the new Automotive and Transport Systems division at the Laboratory. I had been racing Sports Cars since 1954 and written technical articles on vehicle aerodynamics for the American magazine *Road & Track*. One of Bill's early contracts was from Volkswagen to prove that the front-mounted petrol tank in the VW Beetle was not a safety hazard.

Bill needed cars to crash and had limited funds. I had finally completed the Porsche-engined dune buggy, so adopted it as my 'daily driver' and sold Super Daisy for US\$200 to the project. I was invited to see the experiment. John Fitch, because of his interest in Corvairs, and his Fitch Phoenix, came to Buffalo from Connecticut to watch the result and I had my first introduction to him. We had a brief chat about our racing experiences while waiting for Super daisy's experiment.

Super Daisy's front end was so loose that it began to veer from side to side as the cable accelerated it to 50 mph down the track. It nearly missed the pole, but these photos serve as evidence of its contribution to the safety of mankind!



*Super Daisy just after impact*



*Super Daisy's "... contribution to the safety of mankind!"*