

AUTOMATICALLY

EAGLE

Eagle E-types are known for their incredible E-types but when a customer wanted an automatic coupe, they obliged

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY **JIM PATTEN**

Of all the Eagle E-types manufactured they have one thing in common. They share an Eagle-installed manual gearbox. More often five speed, although some are four with even a six-speeder. But when an owner from the Riviera requested an automatic gearbox, there was no question of denial and Eagle acceded.

In some ways Eagle suffer from the Coombs syndrome. Just about every enthusiast who finds the Coombs connection with their Mk 2 jumps to the conclusion that they must have one of the legendary modified cars. Coombs was a Jaguar dealer and sold far more new cars than they upgraded and yet the fable continuous. The Eagle confusion was illustrated when in conversation with a specialist; we heard how he had an Eagle E-type in stock and superb it may have been, but it was still based around a standard car. He had wrongly assumed that every E-type from Eagle was a remanufactured car. Eagle is split into probably three sections. The mainstream is about the fabulous stock of regular E-types, all absolute beauties. If a client chooses to have an individual upgrade then assuming it will not upset the overall balance of the car, Eagle will agree.

Over the past 25 years Eagle have explored the E-type's potential, looking at ways of improving the car's dynamics for the modern world. Always conscious of the domino syndrome – the knock on effect of altering one part and affecting another – every single element was examined. Masters of equilibrium, they soon realised that one upgrade would have serious consequences for the next. In simple terms, imagine fitting powerful brakes but leaving the tyres alone. In heavy stopping the braking potential then exceeds tyre grip. Improve grip and then oil surge in the engine is promoted. It goes on to include suspension mounts and many other aspects. Evolution eventually led to specially designed dampers from Rieger or Ohlin. And when Eagle say that parts are made in-house, they really are. Check out the special gearbox casings and internals in the stores. More recently there is the all-aluminium 4.7-litre aluminium engine block with the appropriate internal parts. Despite this, Eagle's philosophy is to retain as many original parts as possible, restoring them beyond the standards available to the factory in period.

An Eagle E-type is much more than a well restored car. From the bodyshell to the bespoke trim, everything is new. Some 4,000 hours are needed for a minimum build time, taking many months from order to completion. As each one is different, much

IT IS BENEATH THE SKIN THAT SETS AN EAGLE APART FROM THE MAINSTREAM

MODIFIED
EAGLE E-TYPE S1 AUTO

consultation with the client takes place to ensure that their needs are fully respected with guidance along the way if required. It is no wonder that Jeremy Clarkson reckoned an Eagle E-type his favourite in his personal top 100 list of super cars.

Finally, the ultimate progression from an Eagle is the sensational Speedster and low drag coupe. These semi-radical E-types have met nothing but worldwide acclaim from a very critical audience. To date 35 Eagles have been built with the fourth Speedster and second low drag currently going through the workshops.

Automatic E-type

No sooner had the E-type peered over the parapets at the Geneva Motor Show in 1961 than hints of an automatic version were being made. With the available technology of the day it was impossible to shoehorn the heavy Borg Warner into the relatively short wheelbase of the standard E-type. Five years later and with the arrival of the long wheelbase 2+2, Jaguar finally had their chance and for the first time ever, the E-type could be specified with an automatic gearbox, albeit in 2+2 format only. Of course it was a power sapping unit which robbed the E-type of its previous crisp performance but at least it extended the range and proved to sell in decent numbers. From 1966 until the end of the line in 1974, the automatic choice was never improved beyond the lethargic three-speed unit. It worked well enough behind the V12 but no matter what the application, it certainly curtailed the freedom to romp through the gears. It wasn't the ideal Jaguar sought; after all, they were still experimenting with a five-speed manual gearbox, so a three-speed dragging engine power through a torque converter must have felt dismal. As the years passed by it was almost unknown to convert an automatic E-type to a better 'box; most

followed the manual route and latterly the more popular five-speed gearbox now possible in all E-type variants. Interestingly Jaguar's own all-synchromesh gearbox with overdrive fits easily in the 2+2 platform but Jaguar considered the car too powerful for the unit, a matter overlooked for the 420G with its heavier body.

A different Eagle

There's no surprise that the vast majority of Eagle E-types have been Series 1 open two-seaters. But it seems in recent times the following for the fixed head E-type has been growing with many regarding it as the prettier shape. We adore both so will sit on the fence in that argument. Certainly it is the more usable with greater luggage space. It was with practicality in mind that Eagle was approached with specific requirements to blend the excitement of an Eagle with an individual specification. Eagle's Henry Pearman first established the precise needs, which were essentially a fixedhead body style and automatic gearbox. From that fixed point they had a vast menu of options to look through and then it was over to technical director Paul Brace to make it a reality.

The basic drivetrain utilises a standard 4.2-litre engine, albeit built to Eagle's exacting standards in GT specification more suited to life in the 21st century. Regular SU carburetion was selected, while the electronic ignition, performance plug leads and a modern electronic fuel pump supplemented the power unit. Specially developed engine mounts are an improvement over the originals in that they maintain the engine position during the extreme forces they can be subjected to. Extra rigidity was incorporated into the new engine frames. Keeping things cool, today's technology is harnessed and uses an aluminium radiator with the latest cooling fan. Evans waterless



Above left: Gear lever hides its automatic purpose. Note air conditioning outlet vents

Above: SU carburettors were chosen instead of injection and work extremely well

Below: This neat installation adds air conditioning to the heater

Bottom: Slimline bumpers and lights finish off the rear



coolant is the preferred medium. A sports exhaust system with tubular extractors deal with the gases. The ZF four-speed automatic gearbox was chosen for its efficiency, weight and of more significance, its size; a serious issue in an E-type. Paul cannot over emphasise the difficulties in fitting the gearbox. It was an engineering challenge well within the abilities of the Eagle technicians but certainly not a job to try at home. Once installed, it was graced by a transmission oil cooler. A suitable final drive ratio was arrived at before discussing the suspension and brakes. All of the GT option boxes were ticked with improved torsion bars and springs, developed torsion bars and improved suspension mounts and bushes. The brakes too are enhanced to include ventilated discs and an adjustable brake bias valve. Wheels are 6.5-inch wide and have an extra offset with 225/60 x 15 Continental tyres. To sharpen steering the high ratio electrically assisted rack is carried on Polyurethane mounts. For damping, the excellent Rieger shock absorbers were specified.

Destined for a warmer climate, Eagle's recirculating air condition was installed with extra vents either side of the radio console. Obviously a modern sound system with iPod/iPhone interface was fitted neatly in the radio space. Standard E-type seats were deemed acceptable, a sentiment we share while elsewhere anything that took the owner's fancy was optioned from drilled aluminium pedals to a lockable cubby box door. Then of course there was the ultimate statement, choice of colours. Here the discreet approach was adopted with gunmetal for the paint and black for the interior.

Eagle in flight

The words of an 18-year-old ring in my ears and are probably the most profound ever uttered about an E-type. He was admiring the car I was driving on Jersey when he proclaimed that it 'suffered from eternal youth'. Two things made an impact on me. He wasn't locked to any form of mobile device twittering to friends. But probably more significantly, he was making an observation about a 50-year-old car, stating how exciting it looks today. Driving into Eagle and seeing this magnificent fixedhead, it is difficult to put personal preferences aside. We all have different tastes but remembering the words from Jersey, I can quite easily see why this visual impact stirs the emotion.

If all E-types share the same form then it is beneath the skin that sets an Eagle apart from the mainstream. It is immediately apparent that this car's build quality is a step beyond the usual example. Every single area oozes finesse, evidence of work behind the scenes exceeding standards many might think quite acceptable. It is the same inside where the original E-type theme is retained but the standard upped a few notches. Sitting behind the Nardi steering wheel, I note the air-conditioning outlet vents alongside the radio console. The sounds of course flow through a very modern device capable of accepting an iPod with Bluetooth connectivity. Harnessing the latest battery charging system alleviates the need for an ammeter and so this gauge is replaced by a time clock. The seats are reassuringly comfortable and what looks like a regular gearlever falls easily to hand. In fact Paul Brace has skilfully disguised Jaguar's automatic lever to give the appearance of the standard gearstick.

A turn of the key and a brush of the button is enough of a suggestion to alert this E-type to playtime. There is no need of a dyno to be assured of the power emanating from the 4.2-litre engine with the sounds through the exhaust system a concerto!



HARD INTO A BEND, NOW I CAN HOLD THE REVS
LONGER, ONLY LIFTING AS THE BRAKES COME INTO PLAY



MODIFIED EAGLE E-TYPE S1 AUTO



Above: Style over function
Below: Steering wheel by Nardi



My left foot searches for a pedal and finds the brake. I'm easily confused but it is enough as I select drive through the manual style lever. There's a small window in the dash spilling the beans about gear selection. Engagement is followed by gentle squeeze of throttle and we're out into the lanes. As my left foot is issued a redundancy notice, the right takes all of the work in a remarkable civilised fashion.

The exhaust note is always present without being intrusive; more a reminder of the fun to be had rather than a drone. This car responds to driver input and is far removed from the Sixties' automatic stupor. I find myself re-employing my left foot for brake duties, slowing the car as bends approach while my right controls the throttle. The combination allows instant reaction and certainly has this E-type moving. And it needs to in order to satiate the needs of the well set up chassis combined with excellent brakes. For me it is quite a unique experience in an E-type and one that I thought wouldn't suit. But in fact it becomes addictive. Hard into a bend and where normally I

THIS CAR RESPONDS TO DRIVER INPUT AND IS FAR REMOVED FROM THE SIXTIES' AUTOMATIC STUPOR

would be on the clutch and brakes in a downshift, now I can hold the revs that little while longer, only lifting as the brakes come into play. I like it.

Handling of course is impressive as only Eagle E-types are, allowing the ability to mix it with the best of the moderns. As usual there is never enough time but I am told that Eagle's Matt Dewhurst did a lengthy shakedown, finding it extremely relaxed on a decent run. And these guys know what they're talking about. Brace has achieved that rare combination of performance and usability. Around an area such as the Principality of Monaco where streets are tight and busy traffic is a daily expectation, this E-type would pootle along quite happily using whatever ratio it deemed appropriate. But let off the leash to attack the gorgeous countryside, it adopts another character to become the lithe sports car we've known to expect.

This remarkable car, the first of the type built by Eagle, is back in Sussex and is for sale. The owner is moving on to other interests, which of course makes this Eagle E-type available without the considerable waiting time to have a bespoke car built. The full specifications are available from Eagle but from we can see it is fully loaded and looks as fresh as the day it was built. That's no surprise given that it has covered just 2,500 miles. 📄

www.eaglegb.com

