

# IN THE OLD DAYS... AND A VIEW TO THE FUTURE



Leaf springs, steering boxes, throttle cables – are they really that bad? Justin isn't sure whether technological advancements are actually any better...

springs – right up to 2010.

So are we really that further 'down the track' (in Australian terms) than we were in the 'Sixties? Are luxury cars today – spruiked to rocketship levels of complexity and, by extension, presumed capability – such

clear winners in a field dominated by technological advancement?

Driving a well-sorted 'Seventies luxury car can be very revealing. For many years I ran a first-of-its-shape Ford Fairlane, coded by Ford as a ZJ, which was launched in 1979. If you were to pick one of these out of a barn and expect it to work, it probably would, but it wouldn't set your hair on fire.

However, the example I purchased was running on new tyres, had had its steering box overhauled and benefitted from the original fitment of rear leaf springs and, of course, an ultra-original Stromberg carburettor. Fascinatingly the car also had the very last of its generation's pressed steel wheel trims, in an elegant disc pattern not unlike a pre-war Rolls-Royce design. Air conditioning was standard equipment although the electric windows were optional and there was no sunroof.

In the old days, when the days were long and the nights even longer, country Australia only knew one way of executive travel – the long wheelbase, rear-wheel drive, V8-engined barges of the 'Sixties and 'Seventies.

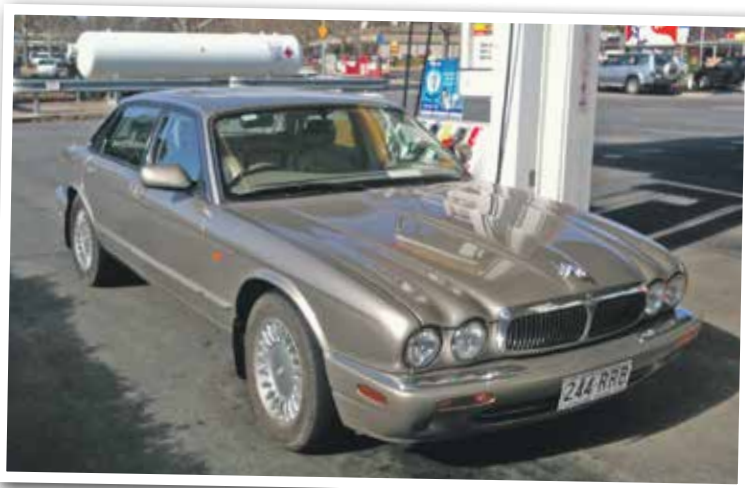
At a time when luxury cars were measured by the metre and features such as air conditioning and nylon upholstery were more important than power steering or alloy wheels, 'Sixties Fords were tough, uncompromising and every bit the countrified land yachts they were designed to represent.

But were they reliable, and could people 'trust' them in the same way as, say, a fuel-injected Jaguar XJ8 – a flagship of the 'Nineties and 'Noughties breed? If one were to read the contemporary press on vehicles such as this (after all, it's a Ford product but in Jaguar clothing) they claimed total engineering authority over previous generations of luxury cars, casting into the darkness the time-honoured principles of carburetion, recirculating-ball steering, leaf-sprung suspension and unnecessary weight.

The truth of course is much more prosaic. Carburetted induction was more

easily tuned in regional locations that did not possess the advanced diagnostic equipment required to resolve basic fuel injection issues. This explains why in the 'Seventies Mercedes-Benz's carburetted range offered a larger selection on order sheets than its fuel-injected models. Mercedes-Benz also persisted with steering boxes until 1999, well after its contemporaries had moved to steering racks amid claims of more precision and 'feel'. Reliability of componentry was quietly and conspicuously avoided by the likes of BMW when making the comparison.

And, to take the Jeremy Clarkson view, are leaf springs simply not sourced from Cobb & Co., knocked off the nearest horse-drawn buggy and inelegantly attached by whatever means necessary to the rear subframe of a land yacht supposedly well past its time? Well, the Chevrolet Corvette still uses leaf springs today, albeit in glassfibre form, as it has since 1953. And what leaf springs are especially good for is carrying a load: All Ford Falcon estate cars ever manufactured in Australia have all been fitted with leaf



One of my all-time favourites – it was a privilege to own this luxury barge.

In regular everyday use it was almost magical to interact with the product of luxury car designers from the immediate post-war period – it was as if their designs had an almost human quality, in that they reflected their inputs far better than cars that have succeeded them in subsequent generations.

For example, the ride of a ZJ Fairlane is incredibly well-balanced when offset against the heavily-assisted power steering unit – the softness of the ride actually helps reduce the oversteer tendencies created by power assistance. European designers would probably deride this as a happy accident but having driven the vehicle for over 25,000 miles I can attest that this was certainly a matter of intention rather than accident. After all, is a rock-hard suspension set-up not designed to create better entry points into corners, thus offsetting the effects of understeer caused by a lack of power assistance? The Fairlane viewpoint is simply the opposite of this engineering instruction.

Then there's the induction, which I found to be so totally reliable as to almost

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embarrass the concept of why fuel injection was necessary, given that even with a Bosch CIS-E unit or Bendix arrangement one has never expected greater than 20mpg out of any two-tonne luxury car produced prior to 2010 and, in light of the recent Volkswagen scandal, even today.

And that reveals another, hitherto unknown side to the so-called luxury barges of the 'Sixties and 'Seventies – and one of the greatest myths ever peddled by the automotive press and competitive manufacturers themselves – that of obesity.

In a direct comparison, the heaviest Australian luxury car ever produced in this era was the Ford P6 LTD, which ran from 1976 to 1979. It was modelled on contemporary Lincolns and featured the largest range of standard equipment as yet ever fitted to an Australian car of any kind. It weighed 1832kg and the only way to increase this was to option a sunroof or a cassette player.

1832kg? The heaviest luxury car ever built in Australia pre-1980? From a time when luxury cars were measured by the metre and size was everything? This is revealing indeed.

A 1997 at-launch Jaguar XJ8, with the four-litre engine and fitted with standard equipment for the Australian market, tipped the scales at 1845kg – 13 kilograms more than the LTD of 1976.

Having owned a 1997 XJ8 I can attest to its utterly superb styling, with beautiful fit-and-finish and a feeling of genuine satisfaction in having owned such a work of automotive beauty. However, I missed the leaf springs, steering box and throttle cable arrangement of the earlier Ford – somehow, these were a lot more 'human' and communicative than the throttle-by-wire and vague steering evident on the later car.

So in light of recent technological 'advancements' offered by today's luxury car manufacturers, we may be asking in the future as to whether 2020's generation of luxury motor cars are really that much better than the XJ8s of yesterday, and are these technologies more important than the svelte lines that only Browns Lane seemed able to provide?

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