

## Buying a Dart - a few tips

With values of top-class examples now exceeding £40,000 and a production run of only 2,650 models, the SP250 makes a tempting purchase. On the plus side, its fabulous V8 engine, large boot (trunk) and convertible hood make it ideal for touring but on the downside, the suspension is basic and the steering heavy and rather vague.

So what should you look for when buying one? Let's deal with chassis numbers first. Chassis numbers start at 100001 and are recorded on a chassis plate which is (or should be) mounted on the front crossmember by the base of the radiator. The passage of time may make them hard to read and sometimes they are simply missing. Later models also have a chassis identification/lubrication plate mounted on the bulkhead (firewall) which contains the chassis number, the engine number and other information such as tappet clearances. The engine number is stamped into the block at the front of the engine immediately beneath the right hand cylinder head. A body number comprising 3 digits, hyphen, 4 digits should be pressed on a plate that is riveted to the bulkhead and finished in body colour. The Jaguar Daimler Heritage people can provide (for a fee) a certificate which gives engine, chassis and body numbers, the supplying dealer, the first owner and the specification of the car in respect of colour and options fitted when it left the factory.

Now to the car itself. The chassis is very substantial but will rust and severe corrosion will mean removing the body shell for access to the corrosion. When Jaguar bought Daimler in 1960, they quickly introduced a major chassis upgrade to overcome the lack of torsional rigidity demonstrated by the early cars. This modification became known as the B specification and it comprises chiefly of 2 outriggers along the length of chassis between the axles and a metal box section hoop which runs up the A pillar on the inside of the car and under the instrument panel. B spec chassis mods are highly desirable although beware corrosion of the metal hoop where it attaches to the chassis. Repair sections are not always available and may need to be fabricated. However I have recently had some complete hoops manufactured and can supply both uprights and cross beams to order.

In order to reduce steering effort many Dart owners have fitted rack and pinion steering but beware that the conversion has used a suitable rack (Triumph Spitfire is favourite) and that the rack is solidly mounted. I have seen some frightful lash-ups, in some cases frankly dangerous, so be warned! Rack and pinion conversion necessitates fitting an electric fan (useful in today's traffic) and also allows use of stalk controls for turn indicators, dip/main and overdrive (if fitted.) You can complete the suspension makeover with polybushes and gas shocks and the rear dampers can be converted from lever arm to telescopic in order to locate the axle more effectively.

The body itself is fibreglass, which can't rust, but may suffer from stress fractures and bodged repairs. The good news here is that pretty much anything wrong with the body can be repaired fairly easily. Beware areas like the radiator supports and where the inner wing panels attach to the chassis as the sheet metal that is embedded in the fibreglass will have rotted away over time and will need replacing. SP250s have a bit of a reputation for bonnets (hoods) flying open

at speed and this may be due to rotten radiator supports and bonnet latch corrosion contributing to the front end becoming unstable and flexing. Take a good look at the chrome. All the unique SP250 chrome parts are hard to find. Bumpers and overriders are scarce and therefore expensive and front grilles and windscreen surround parts are virtually unobtainable. Rusted components can be repaired and re-chromed but this comes at a price. Mazac components that have blistered generally need replacing. These include the rear light surrounds, door handles and bonnet/boot hinges. Replacements are available but they add to your restoration budget.

The trim is easy to replace but expensive. A top quality, complete interior re-trim with new hood, tonneau and hood bag will cost around £6000.

The engine is a beauty and famed for its longevity. The fabulous exhaust note is also part of the joy of ownership! If the engine needs overhauling be very sure that all the sludge in the oil ways is removed. Also check the water jacket in the heads has not eroded sufficiently to risk coolant leakage. Water in the oil should be apparent by pulling the dipstick. If they are damaged, the heads (which are aluminium alloy) will need specialist welding. It's worth fitting valve stem oil seals to reduce oil consumption and smoking. Because the V8 engine was also used in the Daimler V8 Saloon, replacement engines are available although as the value of saloons rises to keep pace with MkII Jaguar prices, supply is becoming less easy. The engines are interchangeable but there are differences between the two such as the rear oil seal design, the air filters and the oil pressure take-off point. SP250 engines are fitted with cylinder head studs whereas Saloon engines use bolts. Many Darts however have been converted to bolts as this is generally seen to be the preferred alternative.

The gearbox is essentially TR3 and is fairly robust and easy to use. It's certainly easier than a Moss box but that's not saying much! A useful addition is an overdrive, which makes main road cruising at the speed limit a much more relaxed affair. In their endeavour to conquest the US market, Daimler took the unusual step of making an automatic version available and a few of these cars are in circulation. Fitting a diaphragm clutch from an Austin Healey 3000 significantly reduces clutch pedal effort and eliminates clutch slip which can be an issue after several thousand miles use. A brake servo will similarly reduce brake pedal effort. The rear axle can be a weak point but the Daimler Club has sanctioned the build of new CWP sets and these are available.

Wire or steel wheels were originally fitted to Darts. Steel wheels have a tendency to crack around the mounting holes and beware cars that were originally steel wheel equipped that have been converted to wire wheels with bolt-on hubs. This increases the track and can lead to suspension/wheelarch fouling. In order to accommodate wire wheels, the nuts for the hub retaining bolts may have been ground away to an extent that is unsafe. Tyres need to have the correct speed rating which in the case of the Dart, is 123mph.

The electrics are fairly straightforward but remember this car has a dynamo and points in the distributor. If you are upgrading the car to Halogen lamps and electric fan, you may wish to consider fitting an alternator and this can be shielded from view with the aluminium cover that Daimler fitted as an option and which is still available from Daimler parts specialists such as Barry Thorne. Electronic ignition is also available. C spec cars had a cigarette lighter as standard and this is a useful item to fit as you can keep your mobile charged. A

mobile (cell) phone is probably the most useful tool to carry in a classic car but make sure the charger is negative earth before plugging in your mobile's charger!

Many SP250s have suffered from poor maintenance and amateur bodged repairs so it's not unusual to find odd fuel pumps, metric fasteners and spurious washer bottles not to mention 5 speed gearboxes, drum braked rear axles and odd seats! To avoid these pitfalls, it really pays to involve a Daimler Specialist in viewing a car before purchase as they will be able to give you a good idea of the extent of work required and the cost of getting your car into the condition you want. Joining the Daimler & Lanchester Owners Club (see useful links) will give you access to any amount of specialist knowledge. Alternatively, call me as I can carry out an assessment on your behalf.

The SP250 is a much underrated car. It has an excellent performance as its power to weight ratio is broadly equivalent to the average Golf or Focus. It is reasonably economical, it can be very reliable, its ride and handling is acceptable and it makes a wonderful sound. Enjoy!