

## Comparing the 1957 Ford T-bird to the 1957 XK140 OTS: Two very different icons

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Looking at my new acquisition, a bright red 1957 Ford Thunderbird with a porthole top parked beside the 1957 XK140 Jaguar roadster, I realized I had an opportunity to provide a unique comparison between the two cars. Both were icons in their time and remain so today. I had one last bay available in the garage and have agonized for some time over what car might best complete my small collection which has focused on Jaguars. The 55-57 T-birds have always appealed as being, well just too cute, and right now they seem underpriced in the market relative to other convertible classics of that vintage. But first some numbers for comparison and then driving impressions. Both cars are fully restored. I have had the XK140 since 1985 and restored it twice. The T-bird was a California car owned by the same family for the past 50 years. They restored it about 10 years ago and drove it very little since then resulting in a total of 66,000 miles, a bit more than a thousand miles a year over its lifetime.

In 1957 the average cost of gas was 24-25 cents a gallon. The average household income in the US was \$4550 a year and the average home cost \$12,220. Today we pay \$2.50 to \$2.75 a gallon. The average household income today is \$63,500 and the average home price is \$263,688. The price of the 57 T-bird was \$3406 and the XK140 roadster \$4050. If we make a comparison relative to the percentage of household income, then in today's money the T-bird would cost \$50,000 and the Jaguar \$60,000. If we base it relative to the cost of a home, then the T-bird comes in at \$60,000 and the Jaguar at \$70,000. This makes sense and in fact these two cars were comparatively less expensive relative to the average household income than today's XKR Jaguar, a Porsche 911 or top end Corvette all of which hover on one side or the other of \$100,000. Indeed, you can pay \$100,000 for a fully loaded Texas edition Ford F150!

The T-bird was designed and produced in response to the Jaguar XK120, the Corvette and other British sports cars including MG's and Healeys. The engine and most parts were sourced from other Ford cars including the Fairlane. The T-birds underwent significant changes through the short 3 years of production, changing from 6 volts to 12 in 1957, moving the spare tire outside in 1956 and then back *Continued on page 16*



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into the trunk for 1957. The porthole top appeared in 1957. Engine choices in 1957 ranged from the 292 V8 (212 hp) to the 312 V8 with one 4 barrel Holley carburetor (245 hp) two Holleys (270 hp) and a limited run of cars with a Supercharger (285 hp). The majority of the T-birds including the 57 models were sold with a 3 speed Ford-o-matic automatic transmission (more on this below).



There is no need to review the XK120/140 other than to say that the XK120 first appeared as a test bed for the fabulous 3.4 liter double over-head cam engine and was produced from 1949 to 1954 and was popular in sports racing. The XK140 was a refinement of the XK120 for the



American market with stronger bumpers, more interior room for the driver, rack and pinion steering and improved brakes. Many stories are told of Hollywood movie stars blasting up and down the Hollywood hills in XK120/140's leaving frustrated police in American sedans far behind.

Specifications for the 1957 XK140 and T-bird are similar.

Both have a 102 inch wheelbase. The T-bird is heavier at 3132 pounds (top adds at least 100 pounds) than the XK140 roadster at 2800 pounds. The 3.4 liter XK C type engine produces 210 hp and revs to 5500 rpm. Thus, while the T-bird boasts slightly more horsepower, it is significantly heavier than the XK140 resulting in 0 to 60 mph times for the XK140 under 10 sec and around 11 sec for the T-bird with the 3 speed automatic. One clear difference I have seen is that the T-bird was cited as giving 8.9 miles per gallon in town and around 12 on the highway, while the XK140 can easily see 16 on the highway. This obviously reflects the lighter weight of the XK140, more refined engine and 4 speed transmission, many with an overdrive.

In terms of production numbers, the T-bird was the clear winner over the Jaguar and Corvette in 55-57. The total production of the 55-57 "little" birds was 53,166 with 21,380 sold in 1957. In comparison only 8884 XK140s (1954-1957) were produced, 3350 of which were full roadsters and the remainder coupes and drop head coupes. In 1957 6339 Corvettes were produced with a base price of \$3176.

The sales number reflect the differences in the "personalities" of the cars and the sales/support system. The XK cars, in particular the roadsters, were seen as pure sports cars and were often raced in amateur events. A large proportion of the Jaguar factory production was taken by Max Hoffman in New York and Charles Hornberg in Los Angeles. Indeed, in Southern California where the weather is dry and uniformly warm, one could use an XK140 as one's day to day car as I knew when a 1957 XK140 roadster served as my one and only car as a graduate student at Caltech. New York and Southern California offered ample Jaguar shops including the major dealers, thus keeping them running was not an issue even with the more complex XK engine. In contrast, maintaining a Jaguar in West Texas or Nebraska would have been more problematic. Since the T-bird engine, transmission, brakes and many other parts were sourced from the mainline Ford sedans, keeping a T-bird on the road in Nebraska would have been quite feasible. This cannot be the whole story as the 1957 T-bird outsold the 1957 Corvette 7:1 yet the Corvette could also be serviced by any Chevy dealer in the hinterland. One factor that drove the T-bird sales ahead of the competition was that the T-bird was marketed as a crossover between a small luxury car and a sports car. This helps explain the preponderance

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with automatics. Perhaps the T-bird's closest relative today is the Mercedes 300 SLK.

Both marques have excellent club support and vendors who provide new reproduction parts. Our North Carolina T-bird club has just as enjoyable and diverse a group of enthusiasts as the Carolina Jaguar club. One obvious difference is apparent in the current market prices for fully restored examples. It is not uncommon to see prices over \$100,000 for a fully restored XK140 roadster while excellent 1957 T-birds with the 312 V8 and one Holley carburetor can be found for \$35,000 to \$50,000. While I have not had to price out major repairs on a T-bird, I am told that a full rebuild of the 312 V8 is less than \$5,000 while I have been quoted three times this for an XK engine. If I could predict the old car market, I would be very wealthy and, I can only guess why the T-birds remain significantly below the concurrent Jaguars, Porsches and Corvettes. On the upside, what this means is that you can get a fully restored T-bird for much less money and with lower upkeep costs, but which offers a nearly equally pleasurable Saturday afternoon driving experience.

The difficulty in comparing one car to the other is that my favorite is always the one I drove last, meaning each is fun in its own right. What comes to mind the moment you sit in the T-bird and close the door is that this is a heavily constructed car. In contrast to the aluminum doors in the XK140 roadster, the T-bird doors are heavy and include roll up windows constructed from thick glass. This is reinforced when you lift the hood which in the XK140 is lightweight aluminum. Were the XK140 hood to fall on your fingers it would not be a serious medical issue. The T-bird hood was made from American steel when thick steel was the norm. If a T-bird hood comes down across your fingers, hope your Blue Cross is paid up. The rearview mirror on the dash of the XK140 and 150 is secured by two modest screws while the T-bird rearview mirror is attached with 5 bolts that led me to believe I could use the rearview mirror as an anchor point for towing another car-- overkill in one car and underkill in the other. The level of interior trim in both cars is excellent with the 57 T-bird dash constructed from engine turned metal. The interior in the T-bird is more spacious and could accommodate one adult and two children while the XK140 is certainly only a 2-person car.

Both cars offer the driver a delightful view of a long hood ahead of the driver, curved down in the XK140 and sporting two long "pontoon" in the T-bird. The T-bird

discarded the oil pressure gauge for just an oil pressure warning light. For the jaguar owner, the oil pressure gauge is akin to a blood pressure monitor to be constantly watched for any small change. Jaguar drivers learn to disconnect their eyes so that they do not track together: one eye watches out ahead and the other is fixated on the oil pressure gauge. Once you get used to not having the gauge in the T-bird, it does make driving a bit more relaxing along with the knowledge that a full engine rebuild will not break the bank.

I am a dedicated to manual transmissions in the old jaguars, reinforced by my experience with an XK150 FHC that had an automatic. Thus, in looking at T-birds I was surprised to find that almost all were equipped with the 3 speed Ford-o-matic transmission as contrasted to a 3-speed stick shift. Indeed, I planned to find a car with a manual transmission until counseled by numerous T-bird owners that the resale was highest for cars with automatics (and bright red). Having put several hundred miles on my T-bird around Chapel Hill by now, I now understand the preference for the automatic. The T-bird is a heavy little car. While only a few hundred pounds more than the XK140, it feels to me much heavier. Hence the combination of the automatic coupled with the big lumbering V8 makes driving the T-bird around town quite pleasant even by today's standards. In contrast the XK140 even with the old 4 speed Moss box is very responsive and having overdrive makes a particularly nice combination.

Which one would I pick for a run down the "Tail of the Dragon" on the Blue Ridge parkway? Hands down it would be the XK140. But picking one to drive across the US, it would be the T-bird. Not only does the T-bird have roll up windows and a removable hard top but the top fits and does not appear to leak in a rainstorm.

In summary, each time I drive the T-bird I find it very substantial, with a slightly heavy feel, but one which is a delight for local driving. It garners just as many thumps-up as the Jaguar. In contrast, the XK140 with rack and pinion steering has a much more precise feel and greater response as the engine revs. I tend to be taking the T-bird out more, perhaps because it is new to me, but also because the locking doors and top is convenient and if someone bangs their knee into the door that is their problem and not mine. But when I lift the garage door the XK140 still takes my breath away after all these years.