

O B I T U A R Y

The saintly saviour of JLR

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► **Ratan Tata, who has died aged 86**, made JLR what it is today. Without Tata's guidance and funding following the 2008 takeover, Jaguar Land Rover would have become a very different business and almost certainly a less successful one. Jaguar Land Rover CEO Adrian Mardell was not exaggerating when he paid tribute: 'We owe everything we have become since then to his unwavering support and dedication.'

Soon after Ratan Tata's family firm bought the British car maker for \$2.3 billion (then £1.2 billion), Lehman Brothers went bust and the worst recession of modern times hit. The timing for Tata could not have been worse. There were fears that JLR may not survive, at least as a standalone maker.

Instead of cost-cutting, the Tata chairman invested. It was a huge gamble that not only saved JLR from possible bankruptcy but put it on the path to record profitability. Financed mostly by Indian bank loans, JLR invested heavily in new product when most cash-strapped car makers were tightening their purses.

'There were many moments when we wondered what we'd done,' India's most celebrated industrialist told me in his Mumbai office in 2015. 'I was convinced the thing to do was to trust my instinct. I felt the recession wouldn't be a long one and I was convinced that SUV sales would flourish again. We needed more products. With great new products the company had a chance. Otherwise, it had no chance. So we invested in new cars.'

Jaguar Land Rover began developing a string of new cars that would become global successes, including the 2012 aluminium-bodied Range Rover (L405), the second-generation Range Rover Sport and the Evoque, which became the fastest-selling model in JLR's history.

Tata's boldness was to prove a masterstroke. As the world awoke from recession, sales of those new cars boomed. From 2010 to 2015 turnover tripled, while sales and employment doubled. Jaguar Land Rover became the world's fastest-growing premium car maker and highly profitable. In 2015, it made £2.6 billion. (Last year was its best year since, with profits of £2.2 billion.)

While JLR as a business is profitable, Jaguar still struggles. Tata told me, when we met in his chairman's office at Bombay House in 2010, that he didn't want Jaguar.

'I wanted Land Rover. Tata was the second biggest maker of SUVs in India and I thought Land Rover would be a good fit. But [previous owner] Ford insisted we took the whole company or nothing.' He had a soft spot for Jaguar, though, and that same Indian bank money would bankroll the new F-Type. His dad owned an XK120.

For a man whose family name is everywhere in India – from big trucks to small cars, from mineral water to mobile phones – Ratan Tata liked to keep out of the limelight.

He gave few media interviews and lived modestly in south Mumbai with his two German shepherd dogs. (He never married.) It was his passion for cars and a keen eye for spotting business opportunities that attracted him to buying Jaguar Land Rover in 2008. It was a gamble, he admitted, and he told me there were times when he 'wasn't very confident' of turning around the fortunes of a company that – despite a history of distinguished cars – had been unprofitable for much of its time.

Following the JLR takeover, a group founded under British colonial rule would become the UK's biggest manufacturing employer. Tata already owned Corus (formerly British Steel) and in 2000 bought Tetley Tea. 'It was a coincidence that we were buying so many British companies,' he told me. 'The opportunities were there and we took them. The Empire was not striking back.'

Apart from my two interviews in Tata's office, we met many times at various events. He was a courteous and modest man with a soft voice, a stately calmness and an astonishing presence: he radiated authority. He became Tata chairman in 1991, and after stepping down in 2012 (although still regarded as 'chairman emeritus') he devoted himself to charitable causes. When we met in 2015 his focus was combating malnutrition in women and children. Tata's holding company is 65 per cent owned by charitable trusts. Most profits go to the trusts and get distributed to charities, covering a vast range of good causes, including medical, education, health and alleviation of poverty. I suspect he would like to be remembered mostly for his philanthropy. But in the UK, he's best known for saving our most important car maker.

The charitable benefactor with a sideline in saving British industry



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