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NEW LOTUS 340R DRIVE

EXCLUSIVE LOTUS vs CATERHAM R500

EVO EXTREME

The quickest hairiest Evo of all





We drive the Lotus 340R – the Elise we helped design for people in search of new extremes – and compare it with its hottest rivals. See p32



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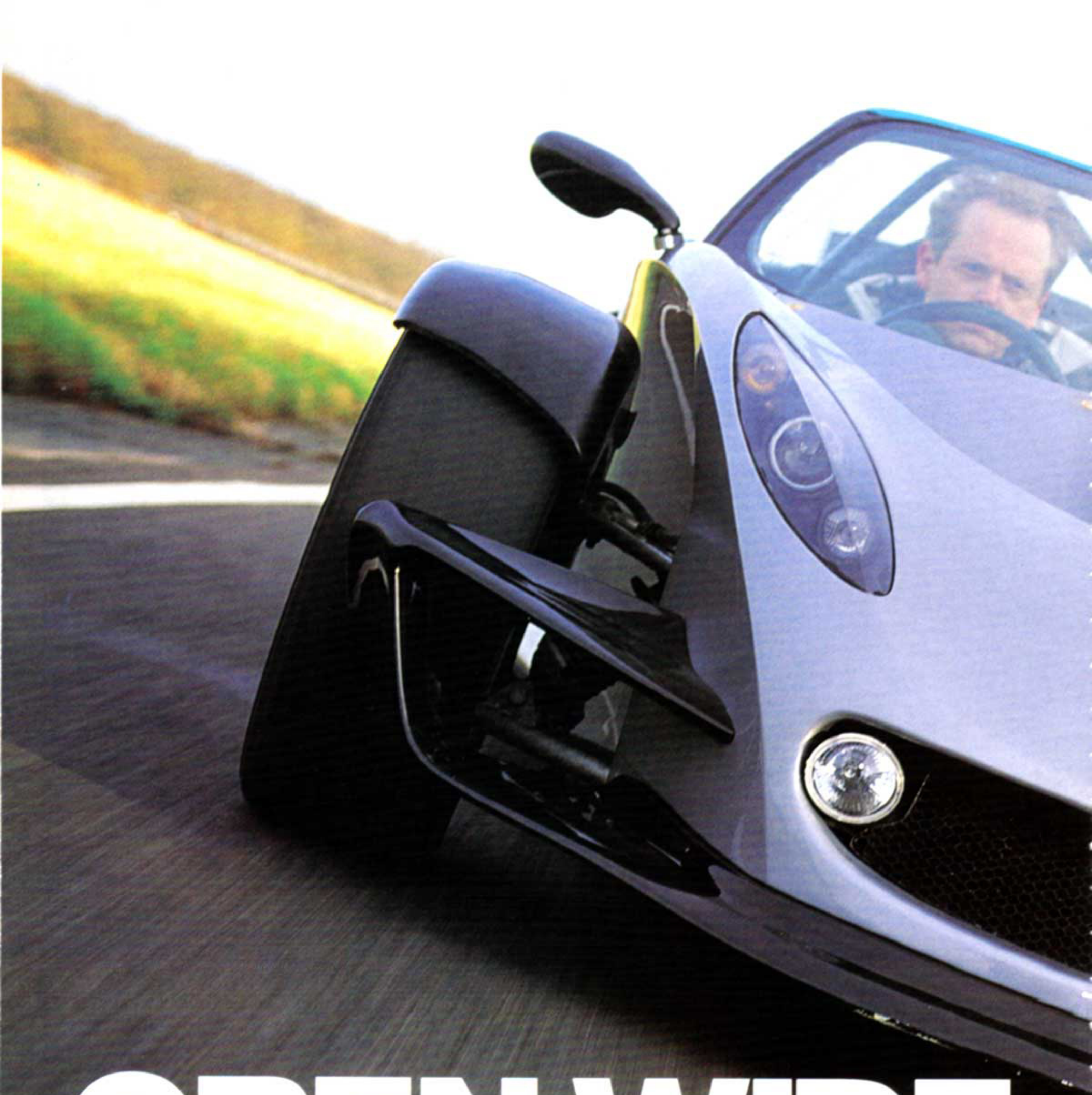
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COVER PICTURE: BARRY HAYDEN



OPEN WIDE AND SAY

DRIVE LOTUS 340R Of course we're grinning. The extreme concept we helped design has



R

finally hit the road. And it's fantastic. By Chris Harris

The wait is over. Lotus's most outrageous road car ever, the 340R, is just about to hit the streets. Now

we've driven it, we're delighted to report that it has the performance to match its looks.

The 340R's development is a story in the Porsche Boxster and Audi TT mould: a concept car that generated too much interest to be ignored. First shown on *Autocar's* cover in July '98, it appeared at that autumn's British Motor Show. On the interest shown at the NEC alone, production was deemed feasible.

Strolling around it on a bitterly cold Norfolk morning, it's easy to see why the Lotus staff involved in the project are sporting unusually smug grins. Whichever way you peer at it, the 340R looks stunning. Best of all, it actually looks better than the show car. In particular, the front mudguards make the track look wider and lend the whole car a more purposeful air.

It also looks considerably better in the flesh than on the page. Even a Lamborghini

Diablo would struggle to steal glances from Hethel's newest toy.

It's the attention to detail that impresses most. The 340R is in effect a very talented visual tease, an Elise in a bikini rather than a one-piece swimsuit, allowing tantalising glimpses of what lies underneath that skimpy outer layer. Being able to see suspension components and the complete exhaust system just makes it all feel extra special.

That bespoke quality continues inside. If you thought the Elise's interior was the last word in minimalist style, be prepared to change your mind. The 340R's arrival makes the Elise look a bit frumpy.

The fascia consists of two substantial parallel aluminium cross members, a pair of Stack gauges perched on the top one. All the other switches are mounted in a vertical bar that connects the floor with the dashboard, as in the M250 concept car.

It all works beautifully and looks fantastic. Just sitting in ♦



Mega-minimal interior has prominent twin Stack dials; concept's gear knob now abandoned for standard Elise item; wires will be tidied on final version

◆ the 340R is an event in itself. Good thing too, because to pull this kind of exercise off cleanly, the car had to be out of the ordinary.

Switch on the ignition and push the centrally mounted starter button and the illusion isn't shattered. Even at idle the 340R makes a more serious noise than any Elise. Blip the throttle a couple of times and there's a hard-edged tone that only a highly tuned four-cylinder engine can produce.

And this is nothing to do with the twin-exit Janspeed exhaust that dominates the view from behind, either. It's

a clever inlet arrangement that allows the car to pass drive-by SVA noise tests but opens an extra valve under load to allow a solid dose of induction noise. Remember, there's no sound deadening material here, not even body panels to shroud the noise.

When you are strapped into the four-point harness, the driving position feels exactly the same as the Elise's. The concept car's gear knob has been ditched in favour of a stock Elise item. Nudging it into first reveals the same cable-operated shift, too.

Get rolling and it's clear that the 340R is much more than a

funky looking Elise. The two cars share their major suspension components, but it's the set-up of the wild Sport 190 version that has been employed on the 340R. That means lower, stiffer springs and uprated dampers. Yokohama was drafted in to develop a new version of its (just) road-legal A032 tyre. Called the AO38 LTS, it has the perfect concept car tread pattern.

Suspension and tyre choice dominate the way the 340R drives. Take a simple fast right hander and, as you turn in, there is very little roll; but what you really notice is the face-

bending level of grip on offer.

What's more, the front and rear spoiler arrangement on the 340R produces a fair amount of downforce, so the tyres get to stick even more stubbornly to the ground at high speed.

The steering feels identical to the Elise, light and crisp in its response to inputs but not very quick just off centre. As a result the 340R doesn't seem to turn in as sharply as expected, but get used to the set-up and the 340R changes direction with the alacrity only a lightweight mid-engined Lotus is capable of.

The drivetrain complements the chassis beautifully. Peak



Racing seats and harnesses give a driving position exactly like the Elise's



Bold styling makes a virtue of necessities like sticking-out door mirrors



Front mudguards are among few changes between concept and road-ready car; philosophy has survived intact

power from the 1796cc K-series is 177bhp at 7800rpm, and 126lb ft of torque is available at 5000rpm. The rev limiter is set at 7800rpm, but the last 800rpm only adds extra noise into the equation.

There aren't any official performance claims as yet, but expect a 0-60mph time of 4.5sec, 0-100mph in 12.5sec and 130mph flat-out. Fast, but not as rapid as we had hoped.

Which brings us to the 340R's one slight problem. Weight. Had Lotus hit its original target weight of 500kg, the 340bhp per tonne claim would have been achieved. But it actually weighs

675kg. Lotus citing a need for excellent safety as the main reason for the extra flab. All very well, but shouldn't it now be called the 262.2R?

The get-out clause is that Lotus is making 340 of these crazy looking machines, and has already sold the lot. It's a shame the superbike-threatening power-to-weight ratio didn't survive the production process alongside the bodywork. Even so, few cars at any price provide similar sorts of thrills.

Although £35,000 is big money for a weekend toy, the 340R might just be worth it.

● Turn over for 340R vs rivals



Specially developed variant of Yokohama A032 gives 340R awesome grip

AUTOCAR AND THE 340R

It doesn't normally feel like this when we test a car.

There's always keen anticipation, but seldom such a sense of pride.

The 340R feels extra special to *Autocar* because it's our car. Not just ours for the day, but ours from day one. When Lotus boss Chris Knight gave the go-ahead to develop the Elise formula to new extremes, he invited *Autocar* to help design the sort of car that would appeal to us. Together with Lotus's design staff, we conceived a featherweight track-bred car with more power, a better gearbox and an even better chassis than the Elise, a £33,000 price and a name coined by *Autocar*'s Stephen Sutcliffe.

Changes have been made on the way, but the spirit of what we set out to achieve has now been realised in a machine that's ready to go on sale. And if you don't like it, we're as much to blame as anybody.



FACTFILE



LOTUS 340R

HOW MUCH

Price £35,000 (est)

On sale in UK January

HOW FAST?

0-60mph 4.5sec (est)

Top speed 130mph (est)

HOW THIRSTY?

Combined n/a

HOW BIG?

Length 3620mm

Width 1702mm

Height 1123mm

Wheelbase 2300mm

Weight 675kg

Fuel tank 35 litres

ENGINE

Layout 4 cyls in line, 1796cc

Max power 177bhp at 7800rpm

Max torque 126lb ft at 5000rpm

Specific output 99bhp per litre

Power to weight 262.2bhp per tonne

Installation Transverse, mid,

rear-wheel drive

Made of Aluminium alloy head and block

Bore/stroke 80.0/89.3mm

Compression ratio 11.5:1

Valve gear 4 per cyl, dohc

Ignition and fuel Lotus engine management, electronic multi-point injection

GEARBOX

Type 5-speed manual

Ratios/rev per 1000rpm

1st 2.92/5.8 2nd 1.75/9.7

3rd 1.31/13.0 4th 1.03/16.5

5th 0.85/20.0 Final drive 4.20

SUSPENSION

Front Double wishbones, coil springs, dampers, anti-roll bar

Rear Double wishbones, coil springs, dampers

STEERING

Type Rack and pinion

Lock to lock 2.7 turns

BRAKES

Front 282mm ventilated, cross-drilled discs

Rear 245mm ventilated, cross-drilled discs

WHEELS AND TYRES

Size 6Jx15in (f), 8Jx16in (r)

Made of Alloy

Tyres 195/50 ZR15 (f), 225/45 ZR16 (r)

Figures are manufacturer's claims

VERDICT

Futuristic looks hide an Elise with extra grunt and grip. If only it weighed just 500kg as originally planned.



THE HAIRY BARE BUNCH

SHOOTOUT 340R vs RIVALS Ariel's Atom and now the Lotus 340R rise to the challenge set by Caterham's potent recipe for stripped-down weekend fun. By Chris Harris

Four years ago, there was only one word on the lips of anyone in search of a small, fun machine that could be thrashed around a race circuit and then driven home: Caterham.

But then in the summer of 1996 Lotus threw down the gauntlet by producing the Elise. It's a car capable of harrying a Caterham around the Castle Combe circuit on a Sunday afternoon, and then not just being driven home but being

used every day of the week, come rain or shine.

In reality the Elise has not turned out to be quite the super-sharp track tool we thought it might be, but that doesn't detract from its significance. Quite simply, the Elise has proved to be a landmark sports car because – despite its packaging compromises – people have flocked to buy it.

In doing so, they showed that the small, lightweight sports car was going to be the socially acceptable face of high-

performance motoring during the next decade.

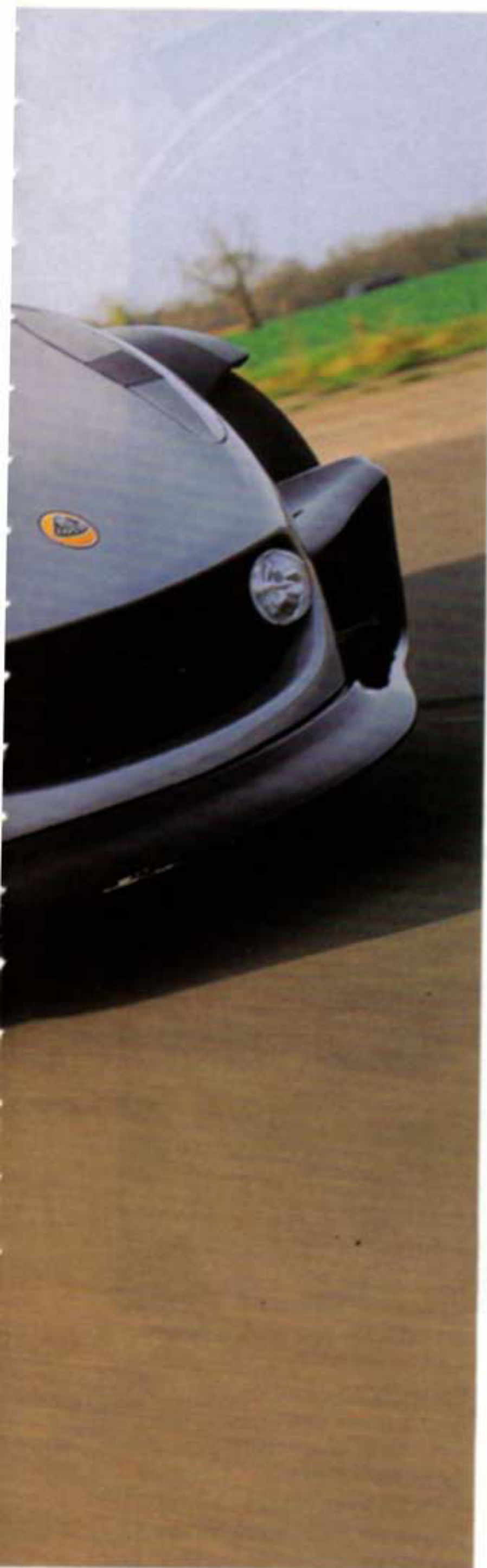
If basic Elises and Caterham Sevens are the bread-and-butter motors of this class, what we're looking at here is the sharp end. The £35,000 Lotus 340R, the £30,000 Caterham Superlight R500 and the £16,000 Ariel Atom represent a new class where the minimal-mass principle is pushed to the boundaries of what can sensibly be driven home from the track.

Even though all three adhere to a design philosophy that expects many owners to spend

more time driving them on a circuit than tackling the daily commute, they remain extremely desirable road cars – if only for the fact that they look so different from anything else with four wheels.

In this respect, it has to be said that the 340R is the odd man out of this threesome. It is essentially a half-naked Elise whose primary function is to look stunning rather than be thrashed around a track.

The 500R, on the other hand, is a thinly disguised racer that just happens to sport a tax disc



Familiar, traditional Caterham looks provide few clues that this Superlight gives an awesome 500bhp per tonne



Ariel takes the same styling route as the 340R, making its sporting intentions clear by cutting back on bodywork

on the inside of that tiny wind deflector. It is the ultimate incarnation of a model that has been undergoing a rolling programme of development for more than 40 years.

Like the Caterham, the striking-looking Atom has been

designed primarily with track work in mind. But it adds a totally different dimension: value. Central to the Atom's appeal is the fact that even the most expensive 190bhp model will cost no more than £19,000.

No point in denying it, with

500bhp per tonne – hence the name – the Caterham 500R's straight-line speed often feels uncomfortable. The engine produces 230bhp at 8600rpm, will run all the way to 9200rpm and slices through the first three gears so quickly that you need

to keep an eye on the shift warning light to avoid hitting the limiter.

The gearchange requires small, firm movements and feels terrific. Caterham talks of 0-60mph in 3.2sec and 0-100mph in 8.2sec. It feels ♦





Lotus uses Rover K-series 1.8 four



Caterham power in front at 230bhp



Test Atom opts for 1.8-litre engine

just enough power to fully exploit the chassis. In a car whose cornering attitude depends so much on throttle inputs, it makes a real difference. In extremes the 340R behaves like you'd expect. Push too hard through a bend and it will understeer. Back off and the tail will snap round quickly, but not viciously. In the 340R you derive enjoyment from being fast and accurate, not going sideways.

It's at this point that the Atom swaps to a different

script. Like the 340R, it is mid-engined, but it uses standard 195/50 R15 Continental road tyres. Grip levels are far lower, and therefore scope for going sideways is that much greater. It's a real hoot, and easy to drift around at will. Front damping is a slight problem at the moment, the car simply not having enough weight over the front end to get the shock absorbers working properly. But by the time customers take delivery in March it

will be sorted, we are assured.

And what about the way they look? Collectively, they resemble an automotive freak show. But it really is a case of take your pick. One thing, though. If posing is your intended pursuit, take the 340R. It will no doubt be responsible for numerous neck injuries on the King's Road come the new millennium.

Choosing an outright winner really is very difficult. For an estimated £16,000, as a 1.8-litre car in road-ready trim, the Atom is fantastic value for

money, but still a little rough around the edges.

Lotus wants more than twice that for a 340R, and even though it isn't quite the car we'd hoped for, its sheer desirability all but justifies the price.

That the Caterham looks so familiar isn't a problem. Its sole purpose is to thrill, and it succeeds completely. For £30,000 – that's in non-assembled kit form – it offers thrills the Atom and 340R, talented though they are, can't match. **O**

FACTFILE

	LOTUS 340R	CATERHAM 500R	OUR CHOICE ARIEL ATOM
HOW MUCH?			
On the road price	£35,000 (est)	£30,000 (kit)	£16,000 (est)
HOW FAST?			
0-60mph	4.5sec	3.2sec	5.6sec
0-100mph	12.5sec	8.2sec	18.0sec
Top speed	130mph	143mph	115mph
HOW BIG?			
Length	3620mm	3100mm	3410mm
Width	1702mm	1575mm	1798mm
Height	1123mm	800mm	1195mm
Wheelbase	2300mm	2225mm	2345mm
Weight	675kg	460kg	530kg
ENGINE			
Layout	4 cyls in line, 1796cc	4 cyls in line, 1796cc	4 cyls in line, 1796cc
Max power	177bhp at 7800rpm	230bhp at 8600rpm	118bhp at 5500rpm
Max torque	126lb ft at 5000rpm	155lb ft at 7200rpm	122lb ft at 3000rpm
Specific output	99bhp per litre	128bhp per litre	66bhp per litre
Power to weight	262.2bhp per tonne	500bhp per tonne	227bhp per tonne
Installation	Transverse, mid, rear-wheel drive	Transverse, front, rear-wheel drive	Transverse, mid, rear-wheel drive
GEARBOX			
Ratios/mph per 1000rpm	1st 2.92/5.8 2nd 1.75/9.7 3rd 1.31/13.0 4th 1.03/16.5 5th 0.85/20.0	1st 2.69/6.6 2nd 2.01/9.0 3rd 1.59/11.2 4th 1.32/13.9 5th 1.13/15.9 6th 1.00/17.8	1st 2.92/5.5 2nd 1.75/9.2 3rd 1.31/12.3 4th 1.03/15.6 5th 0.85/18.9
Final drive	4.20	3.62	4.20
SUSPENSION			
Front	Double wishbones, coil springs, dampers, anti-roll bar	Double aerofoil-section wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, coil springs, dampers, anti-roll bar
Rear	Double wishbones, coil springs, dampers	De Dion axle, radius arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, coil springs, dampers, anti-roll bar
STEERING			
Type	Rack and pinion	Rack and pinion	Rack and pinion
Lock to lock	2.7 turns	2.1 turns	1.0 turn
BRAKES			
Front	282mm ventilated, cross-drilled discs	254mm ventilated discs	240mm ventilated discs
Rear	245mm ventilated, cross-drilled discs	228mm discs	240mm discs
WHEELS AND TYRES			
Wheels	6Jx15in, cast alloy	13in, magnesium hub, alloy rim	6Jx15in, cast alloy
Tyres	195/50 ZR15 (f), 225/45 ZR16 (r) Yokohama A038 LTS	185/55 R13 (f), 215/50 R13 (r) Avon CR500 radials	195/50 R15 Continental

All figures are manufacturer's claims



Three approaches to keeping it clean and simple: Lotus instruments ape motorcycle style; Caterham's sole dial is revcounter; Atom is most conventional