

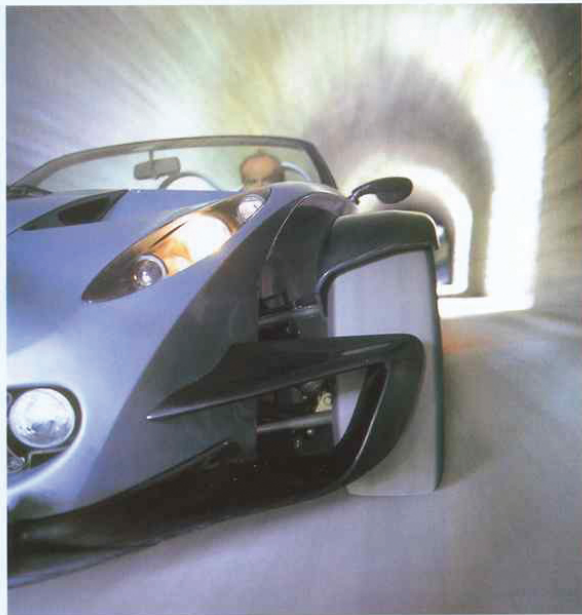
[Lotus 340R]





THRILL CLIMBER

The 340R could be the ultimate hillclimb car – so Harry Metcalfe took it to the ultimate hillclimb •




I've had the 340's throttle welded to the aluminium bulkhead for miles now. Above 120mph you really start to *feel* the speed, you're so intimate with this car, the road surface whipping past the translucent side panels. Gus Gregory and John Hayman in the pursuing Golf TDi camera car are a receding red dot in the mirror as I make a glory bid for the outer limits of the speedo dial. I'm not sure why, but show any British car enthusiast an empty autobahn and he'll do the same. We're incapable of letting a stretch of unrestricted tarmac go to waste; we just have to max whatever car we're in at the time, even if it happens to be a rented Nissan Micra. The Germans have a similar inability to walk past a sunbed without throwing a towel on it, even if it's raining. Call it a quirk of the national character.

A footling 218kph (137mph) is all it will finally muster. Occasionally I think the needle is going to make a final lunge for the 220kph decal on the speedo but it hits the proverbial brick-wall and that's that. This car seems to have the drag characteristics of the Tate Modern, the huge rear spoiler working overtime – combined with the undertray, it generates substantial downforce at higher speeds. So you can hit

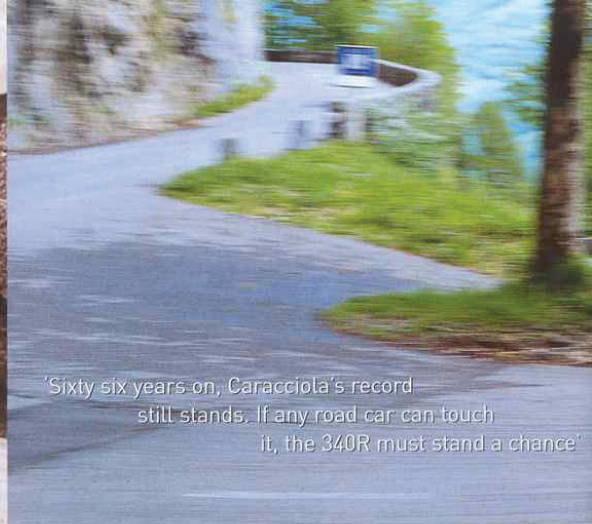
215kph in fourth, but then it's as if an airbrake has been flicked on – you make a move for fifth gear and you've lost 10kph before it engages. We seem to be stopping for fuel more regularly than I'd hoped, too. In fact cruising through France at around 95-100mph doesn't see more than 20mpg, and when we're really pressing on, a tankful is slugged back at the rate of 16.3mpg. Apparently the 190bhp conversion makes the notoriously rich-running K-series engine run even richer still, so you're the poorer as a result.

Finding out just where the speedo needle stops climbing is not the reason we're here though. I'm on a mission to prove a pet theory – that the Lotus 340R could just be the hottest road-going hillclimb car ever made. To test the theory we're on our way to the ultimate hillclimb... no, make that *mountain* climb, the infamous Klausen Pass in Switzerland. This amazing place used to be a regular feature on motorsport calendars in the 1920s and '30s, but after Switzerland decided to ban all forms of motorsport after the war, it was consigned to history. Obviously the climb's still there and somehow the authorities were persuaded to let the event be resurrected in 1993 and again in 1998 with 450 competitors all trying to beat the hill record which was set on an epic day in August 1934. So far no-one has...





The Klausen Pass has two incredibly tortuous, twisting sections, joined by a long, straight section through a valley floor. It's one of the world's truly great roads. Far left: blasting through one of the old tunnels, no longer used by road traffic



'Sixty six years on, Caracciola's record still stands. If any road car can touch it, the 340R must stand a chance'

In 1934 the Schumacher of the day was Rudi Caracciola. Recovering from a heavy crash at the Monaco GP the previous season in which his hip had been shattered (his right leg was now two inches shorter than the left), Carracciola was determined to confound all the doubters who thought his great career was over. He entered the Klausen Pass mountainclimb in a works Mercedes W25, its 8-cylinder 4.3-litre engine pushing out 445hp. The event turned into a head-to-head with his great rival Hans Struck in the amazing rear-engined 452hp V16 Auto Union designed by Ferdinand Porsche. This was the era of the original, legendary Silver Arrows.

The Klausen hillclimb is a tortuous and demanding 13.4 miles, making it the longest in the world. It climbs 4000ft to 6404ft, its myriad twists and turns embracing 35 hairpins, several tunnels, and a straighter section half-way up a valley where these pre-war monsters would reach 160mph. Caracciola already held the record at 15min 50secs which he set in 1932, but on that day in 1934 he posted an extraordinary time of 15min 22secs, smashing the record by

28secs. Struck had it all to do and was flying on his final run in the Auto Union when the huge car suddenly tried to spin off the mountain near the top. Struck gathered it together but lost to Caracciola by 3secs. No-one else was anywhere near their times, third-place driver Whitney Straight being almost a minute behind in his Maserati. The crowd had witnessed an extraordinary display of man and machine at the limit on the ultimate mountainclimb. Sixty six years on, Caracciola's record still stands.

If any roadgoing production car can touch it, I reckon the 340R must stand a chance. Lotus has always made good hillclimb cars, being so light and agile that they often embarrass more powerful machinery. Indeed the Lotus Seven and its variants have been so successful over the years that the regulators recently decided to ban them from the production class and put them in a class of their own. That still left the Elan, the '60s rear-drive original, and I campaigned one in hillclimbs for several years with no little success, though that had more to do with Colin Chapman's brilliance as a car designer than any driving talent of mine...

When the Elise arrived it was so successful it was moved into the Modified Production Class. Which brings us to the 340R, which by my reckoning ought to be the quickest of them all. You only have to look at the options list to see that it means business: 190bhp upgrade, titanium sports silencer, a trick camshaft pulley to advance the inlet cam... You can turn the Stack instruments into data-loggers, recording lap times, hill times, 0-60 and quarter-mile times. You can even overlay your own times on a track against a pro Lotus driver in a 340R. The ultimate option, though, has to be the six-speed sequential helical gearbox – only serious racers need apply with a list price of £9995 plus fitting. This is a hardcore options list: no air-con or drinks holders here. Not a car you'd usually choose to drive half-way across Europe...

The weather isn't helping either, for as soon as we turn off the motorway and head for the Pass, it starts to rain again. On the autobahn the speed keeps the rain away from the driver; you can watch the water gather in vortices at the





Meicall and 340R follow in the tracks of Caracciola and the mighty Mercedes W25

base of the windscreen surround, by the side mirrors, before doing a little dance and flicking away – some of it catching your sleeve, some running down the side panels and onto the floor (so that's what the holes in the floor are for). But at slow speeds you're forced to shield your eyes from the raindrops. Which isn't fun.

Worse is to come. When we get to the western end of the Pass we find there's a barrier across the road. After driving most of the day, all I want to do is get to our hotel, but that's at the other end of the Pass, which means we'll have to take a 80-mile detour. Things couldn't look bleaker.

Eventually we arrive in Linthal, at the base of the Klausen Pass. It's late, and we've driven the 750 miles from home in one hit, but I can't resist driving to the start of the climb itself. And there it is, right there in front of us, beginning with a cobbled, banked hairpin. I'm tempted to have a reccé up the hill, but not only is it still raining but fog has descended too.

Instead we check into the Hotel Raben. And over a few welcome beers our spirits are soon lifted. Chatting to the locals, we learn that the Pass is closed for much of the year because it

gets blocked by snow – but it's going to be open this weekend for the first time this year.

Trouble is, Switzerland is not the best place for a noisy 340R to make a bid on a hill record on a public road; there's a danger we'll make the wrong sort of impression on the locals, especially the ones in the smart uniforms with guns round their waists. But there's more good news. We get a tip-off that the barrier, which is three-quarter-way up the climb, will be lifted at 4pm the next day, giving us a chance to drive the course before word gets out that the Pass is open again and it fills with traffic. Looks like I might get a shot at the record after all. Outside, the 340R sits in the deserted car park with its Prada-style nylon showercap hopefully keeping the weather out of the cockpit. Inside the hotel, photographer Gus proves what we've always suspected about him by ordering horse for dinner (very tasty, apparently).

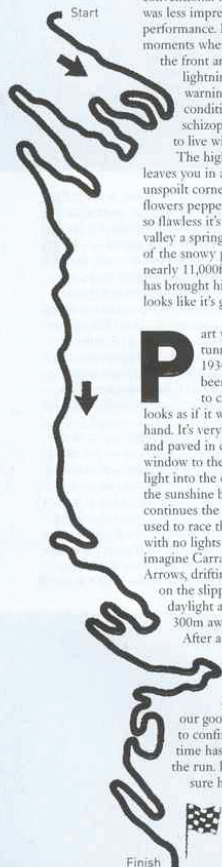
Next morning the fog has gone and snowy peaks are briefly visible as the clouds start to break. The scale of the place is amazing; things are definitely looking up. Until, that is, it's time to check the 340R – and find that the Prada

showercap is completely useless at keeping the rain out of cockpit. The seats are soaked, the Alcantara seat-trims looking like electric blue chamois cloths that have been soaked in a bucket overnight. Fortunately the owner of the hotel takes pity and provides bin-bags to sit on, then escorts us to the only car wash for miles and insists on treating the Lotus to an early-morning hot-shower-cum-powerwash. The 340R collects dirt like no other car I know and 750 miles of accumulated grime disappears before our eyes. Checking the oil is a bit of a fag – the engine cover is attached by no fewer than nine Allen bolts – but all seems well and virtually no oil has been used.

The plan is to get the photography out of the way before the barrier is raised, so we set off to see the pass for the first time, the Golf leading. The 340R's crazy Yokohama tyres take time to acclimatise to. At first there seems less grip than you might expect, given their radical hand-cut appearance, but they soon warm up and then start providing amazing levels of grip, even on this morning's damp surface, their bite into corners making a mockery of the Golf's more



Below: the course of the Klausen Pass hillclimb, all 13.4 miles of it. Swiss authorities banned motorsport years ago, but Metcalfe and 340R slipped through



conventional tyres. On the run down yesterday I was less impressed with their wet weather performance. Driving at night I had two scary moments when unseen standing water sent first the front and then the rear of the car into lightning aquaplaning slides with no warning: if you intend using the car in all conditions, I would go for a less schizophrenic tyre which would be easier to live with, saving the A038 for track work.

The higher you climb the more the scenery leaves you in awe. This is an incredibly beautiful, unspoilt corner of Switzerland: with yellow flowers peppering the mountain pastures, it looks so flawless it's as though someone has given the valley a spring-clean just before we arrived. Some of the snowy peaks surrounding the pass are nearly 11,000ft high, and the light is perfect. Gus has brought his 'landscape' camera with him. It looks like it's going to get a lot of use today.

Part way up, we come across an old tunnel which would have been in use in 1934 (another, much larger tunnel has been cut through the rock alongside it to carry today's traffic). The old tunnel looks as if it was chiselled out of the rock by hand. It's very narrow, barely 4m wide, curved and paved in cobbles. Every 30m or so there's a window to the outside world, shedding pools of light into the darkness. Then you're briefly out in the sunshine before another, straighter tunnel continues the climb upward. The fact that they used to race through here at three-figure speeds with no lights on the cars almost defies belief. I imagine Carraciola and Struck in their Silver Arrows, drifting through the unforgiving corners on the slippery stones before blasting back into daylight at the far end of the tunnel some 300m away.

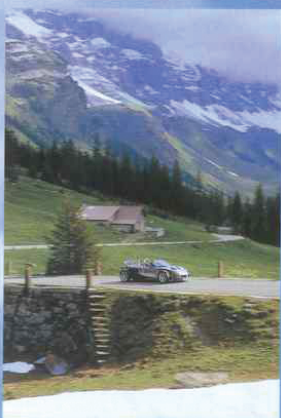
After a leisurely lunch I prepare for my run up the hill. Most of the pictures are in the can, but we're yet to see the final part of the climb beyond the barrier. Gus and our good buddy John Hayman go on ahead to confirm that it's now open (It is!) so the time has arrived to strap myself in and start the run. I'm just a little nervous, not quite sure how hard to push, but after travelling all this way I'm desperately excited to discover what the next 13.4 miles have in store.

I click my stopwatch as I cross the start line and the exhaust





340R was simply
dazzling on the deserted
mountainclimb; it could
have been made for this.
It makes even an Elise
feet flabby



'The higher you climb, the more the
scenery leaves you in awe. Some
peaks are nearly 11,000ft high'



[Lotus 340R]

barks as I begin the assault. Climbing up through the trees, damp patches still remain on the surface from last night's rain, and I can see a swirl of leaves behind me in the mirrors from the draft as the Lotus blasts through the debris left since the winter. The level of grip the 340R develops is beyond excellent – surreal is more like it – and you have to force yourself to push past normal roadcar limits and up to almost single-seater levels of grip, until you begin to sense the nose starting to push wide.

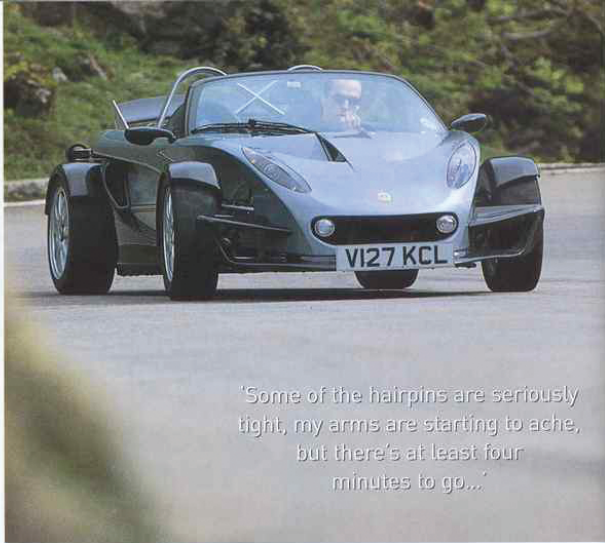
So far second gear is perfect, the engine on song from 5000rpm upwards. Straight-lining a series of bends, I catch a glimpse of some flowers tied to the railing, presumably where some poor soul has plunged over the edge. I make a mental note not to get too carried away.

Just as I leave the trees behind I'm into the tunnel and the air is filled with the glorious sound of a screaming K-series reaching its 8000rpm limit. The change-up light blinks, into third, and out into the sunlight before plunging back into another tunnel with a sharp left-right combination. The tarmac is polished and offers little grip but this car is so controllable I'd like to go back and do it again and again. But now there's a more unusual challenge ahead, one I've never met before on a hillclimb: roadworks with temporary lights. I'm praying they're on green as I round the corner, otherwise this is all going to be rather pointless. Fantastic – a green light beckons me on, but a truck is backing into my path. Fortunately he sees me, chugs forward and waves me past.

The way the 340R hovers up dust and dirt from the roadworks with its 'venturi' undertray is amazing. I can hear the tinkle of tiny stones on the alloy floor and behind it looks as if I've hit a 'smokescreen' button on the dash. The gradient is now less severe and the flat middle-section of the climb opens up before me, only it's not that flat – the road is rippled with the sort of uneven tarmac you find in the Fens. I know that to get anywhere near a decent time I've got to keep it nailed through here. Matching the 160mph of the old Grand Prix cars is out of the question, but I'm still flat in fourth.

There are magic moments here when the 340R enters a twilight zone and the suspension starts to work overtime. This is where the genius of Lotus's gifted chassis designers shines through. In my mirrors I can see the cycle-wings over the rear tyres become almost a blur, yet the body remains flat and the car never bottoms-out.

Next hazard: the tiny hamlet of Urner Boden, with its 50kph limit. I trundle through, taking a welcome breather. I'm about nine minutes into the climb, but the respite is short-lived: it's back on the pace before the start of the next twisty section. I've climbed nearly 2500ft and I'm starting to feel the power ebb away as the engine is gradually starved of oxygen. A deer jumps out from the trees, as snow starts to appear at the edge of the road. This really is surreal. The recently opened barrier flashes past as the road starts to narrow. I'm making more use of first gear up here. Some of the hairpins are seriously tight – the only way a V16 Auto Union would



Above: dry-road grip is just phenomenal, as the 340R chases the old record. Below: Rudi Caracciola in the W25 Mercedes – 450bhp and skinny tyres meant the tail was rarely straight

get round would be with a bootful of throttle – and my arms are starting to ache, but there's at least four minutes to go. The smell of hot brakes wafts into the cockpit.

A car appears, coming in the opposite direction, then another. I can't push so hard now – there's bound to be more. More more snow now, and rivers of water across the road. Gus and John appear stage-left in a lay-by, setting up a shot for later. How much further to the finish can it be? I fluff a gearchange, slotting third instead of first, typically in earshot of the others – the vague shift is one of the 340R's few shortcomings.

The road is just a ribbon of tarmac between deep snowbanks now. One last push for the top,

into third – and suddenly there's a snowball the size of a football in the middle of the road. Oh sh**. There's no time to avoid it and it explodes over the car, showering me in fine grains of ice. But no harm done. At last, elation bubbles over as the finish appears. There's a café, with bikers already gathering outside, preparing for their moment of glory. I stop the clock and glance down, having no idea what sort of time to expect. The digital readout shows 15mins 36secs, 14secs outside Rudi's record. But what a ride, what a road, and what a car. I reckon the 340R could well dip under the hill record, given a closed road and a bit of practice.

But I don't want it to. Caracciola's record should remain forever. His drive 66 years ago, powering that mighty Mercedes up this magical ribbon, the ultimate mountainclimb, is beyond heroic. From where I'm sitting, the man's a god. ■

