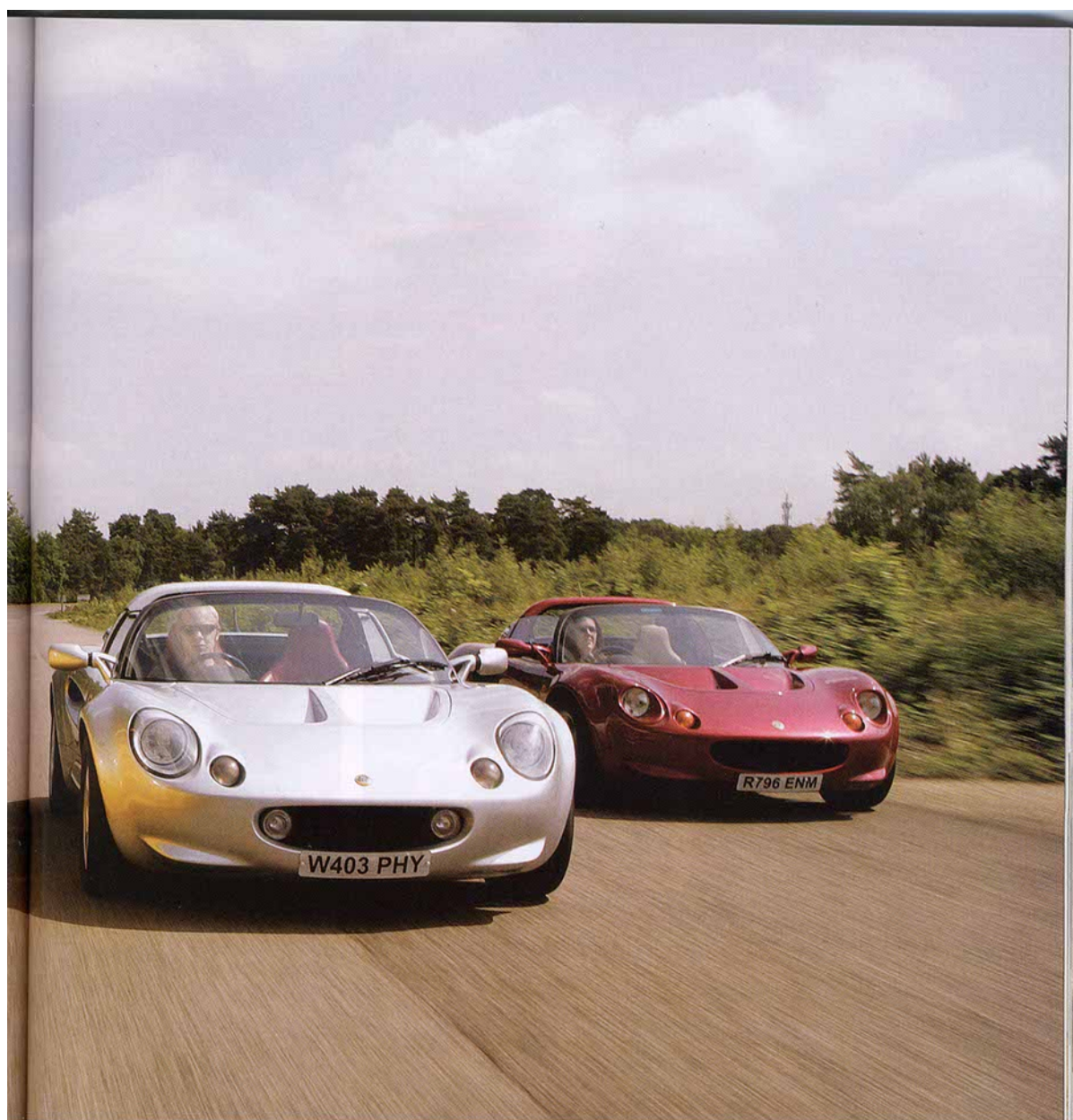




ELISE OF LIFE

As Lotus' road rocket hits 10 and prices near rock bottom, **Alastair Clements** gets some cheap thrills in the best sports car of its generation, an affordable icon that redefined a breed

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER



It's hard not to feel glum sometimes when contemplating the future of the classic car world, particularly if you have a penchant for British machinery. Minis are still being churned out of an Oxfordshire factory, but today's bloated package bears little resemblance to Issigonis' brainchild and the equally bloated profits it yields are registered on spreadsheets in Munich rather than Cowley. TVR is Russian and, after a brief spell under Stateside control, Colin Chapman's Lotus is in Malaysian hands.

From the current market place of homogenous oriental blobs, intentionally uglified Europeans and boatloads of retro horror from across the pond, it's tricky to pick out more than a handful of current cars that our kids are likely to covet in 30 years' time. Yet throughout auto-

motive history there have been those cars that, from launch, have acted as markers in the development of four-wheeled transportation, mould-breakers whose fame means that even tree-huggers know them by model rather than marque – Mini, Beetle, Golf, E-type, Mustang.

Ten years ago another name was added to that list: Elise. Mazda may have revived the affordable sports car with its brilliant MX-5, but Lotus redefined the genre when its pared-down two-seater hit the road in 1996, a year after its public debut at the Frankfurt Motor Show with a little girl called Elise – grand-daughter of Romano Artioli, Bugatti supremo and then-owner of Lotus – at the wheel. The genius of the Elise was the way it distilled the history and experience of its maker into a small sports car with a chassis

that could best track day heroes yet provided everyday refinement and practicality. It had handling and pace that humbled supercars yet drank with a supermini's thirst – and all this for the price of an ordinary family saloon.

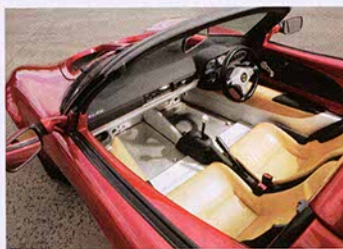
The best news is that, thanks to its unexpected yet overwhelming popularity, an example of the car that *Autocar* said 'rewrites the book on driver appeal' can be had for as little as £8000 today. At that price, we reckon everyone should own one so we've gathered the four finest examples of the first-generation Elise to find out whether it deserves a place alongside the greats.

Negotiate the high, wide sill – cut-down to aid entry on S2 versions – of Toni Ashwood's early, standard car and it displays a delightful simplicity compared to the complexity of its M100



The whole those parts contributed to was very special – the original Elise is a precision instrument

Outline bears the hallmarks of all of designer Thomson's personal favourites, including Dino. MMC metal matrix composite discs of early cars were replaced with cross-drilled cast iron from 1998. The rear spoiler was added at a late stage to combat rear-end lift at speed



Elan forerunner. No airbags, air-con or electricity in here – from the superb driving position the cabin is, appropriately, dominated by its exposed chassis.

The maestros of Norfolk have long been famed for building cars whose chassis brilliantly balance the disparate requirements of steering, handling and ride, but for the Elise they neared perfection. It was achieved by engineer Richard Rackham throwing out the rulebook and ditching the long-lived steel backbone in favour of a hitherto-untried structure of aluminium extrusions, riveted and bonded together to create a light spaceframe that was not only exceptionally stiff but also beautiful enough to act as decoration for the interior. Rackham's attention to detail and near-obsession with extrusions meant he employed this simple method to create elegant solutions for other parts of the car, such as door hinges, pedals and an oddments tray.

Weighing just 68kg, the chassis was clothed by hand-laid glassfibre front and rear clamshells styled by Lotus Design boss – and friend of Rackham – Julian Thomson. There are cues from Europa – the first mid-engined Lotus road car – and Lotus 23 sports-racer, plus strong overtones of the Ferrari Dino that Thomson had in his garage. As well as the innovation, in the best Lotus tradition you can find some pretty lowly sources for Elise bits: Metro wing mirrors, Vauxhall and Peugeot switchgear, plus an engine and gearbox sourced from the MGF, but originally



designed for entry-level Rovers. Yet the compact, all-alloy K-series was perfect for the Elise.

The whole those parts contributed towards was something very special and the original Elise is a precision instrument. It is often compared to the original Elan, but its ancestor was luxurious by comparison and a decade on the Elise feels more like a 'Frogeye' Sprite for the PlayStation generation. With all frills and frippery trimmed, it's a car that makes the most of ordinary mechanicals to provide maximum fun for minimal outlay. Like the Sprite, the Elise doesn't rely on impressive power outputs: its four-pot motor offers just 118bhp, but at 723kg it's light enough to yield an impressive 163bhp per tonne.

The Elise will hit 60mph from rest in 5.5 secs, but straight-line performance is not what the experience is all about. Point-to-point, there are

few cars to touch a well-driven Elise – both for pace and pleasure. From its delicate unassisted steering to the unservoed brakes, it's all about feedback and precision. That middle pedal is so feelsome that doling out just the right amount of retardation is child's play, plus it's firm enough to provide the perfect platform for heel-and-toe downshifts. And the handsome three-spoke wheel is like a living thing, light and responsive yet always communicative. Add in a ride – from double wishbones all round – that's soft enough to dismiss the bumps and scars that make British roads the ultimate test for a sports car chassis and the Elise is hard to better for a B-road blast. Despite its reputation for aggressive lift-off oversteer, its limits are easy to explore once you adjust to the fact that more than 60% of its weight lies around the rear axle.

No complaints about the chassis then, but ask a cross-section of early Elise customers how their car could be improved, and the response would likely be universal: more power. First response from Lotus was the track-only Sport 190 upgrade kit, which used a 'Very High Performance Derivative' (VHPD) version of the K-series engine producing 187bhp and driving through a straight-cut gearbox. Of more interest to the majority of customers was the 1998 Sport 135, a limited edition – and later aftermarket upgrade kit – with an extra 17bhp, stiffer suspension and a close-ratio 'box. The 160bhp Sport 160 followed two years later.

But the most popular of the occasionally bewildering list of uprated Elises arrived at the Geneva Motor Show in 1999 when Rover finally released the variable valve-timed 'VVC' version of the MGF's engine for the superb 111S, whose moniker was a nod to both the Elise's M111 project code and the traditional Lotus 'Sprint' designation. A combination of bigger valves, better breathing and a continuously variable cam-lobe profile added power towards the top of the rev range without sacrificing torque. The styling, too, gained a healthy dose of aggression from its cookie-cutter grille with inset driving lights, cowlhead lamps, smoked indicator lenses, wheelarch lips to accommodate fatter rear tyres and a larger rear wing.

Andy Rowe's car provides a graphic demonstration of the 143bhp 111S's extra punch: where the standard car gets breathless past 5000rpm, the uprated K-series has much greater lung capacity and urges you to keep your foot in to the 7200rpm limiter. More noticeable even than the extra poke is the 111S's close-ratio gearbox, which keeps the engine singing in its heady 5000rpm-plus powerband. The handling is more different than you might imagine too, with fatter rear tyres, plus revised springs and dampers creating a more secure feel from a chassis that's more inclined to understeer. It feels less adjustable at first, but that extra punch makes the 111S easier to control on the throttle once breakaway arrives on a circuit.



Elise 111S is the most popular of the many special editions and uprated cars. This one has non-standard Ferrari-style gearlever gate. The taller valve gear of the 143bhp VVC K-series engine is accommodated by a bulge in the engine cover. 111S also had new six-spoke alloys

PLATFORM STEALS...

M120/M250

In '97, Lotus penned a Rover KV6-powered coupé on a stretched Elise chassis, but it was canned. The concept was revived in '99 for the 2+2 M250 concept.



VAUXHALL VX220/VX TURBO

Launched in '99, the Opel Speedster (Vauxhall VX220 in the UK) used a modified Elise chassis in a suit by Martin Smith and powered by a torquey 2198cc GM engine. Its predicted bargain status hasn't yet materialised.



ELISE S2

Lotus unveiled a restyled Elise in 2000 with easier access, improved build, more secure handling and better cabin; 189bhp Toyota power came in '04.



PININFARINA ENJOY

Shown at Geneva in '03, the Enjoy started as an Elise-based styling exercise and, despite plans to build 100 of the detachable bodywork cars, it remained one.



EXIGE S2

An anti-climax, but still capable of cornering harder and faster than its siblings, and the same Toyota power unit as the Elise 111R gave adequate pace. Lotus added a Roots-type supercharger for the 240R limited edition.



EUROPA S/CIRCUIT RACER

With M120 and M250 canned, the 'luxury' Elise finally arrived this year using the VX220 Turbo's 200bhp four. Next up is the 'Circuit Car', an Elise designed solely for track use.



'The close-ratio 'box keeps the engine singing in its 5000-plus band'



Extra power is all very well, but with it comes extra weight – and frustration for the engineers who, throughout the Elise project, had been desperate to stick to Colin Chapman's principles of achieving performance through light weight and innovation. As early as '96 there were plans for a lighter, more extreme Elise, and a challenge from *Autocar* led to designers and engineers returning to their original impetus to create a limited-run, 'step-in' weekend plaything.

With a target weight of 500kg and power to weight of 340bhp/tonne the 340R tag was born, but by the time the car was launched in '99 those numbers were impossible to achieve and '340' would instead refer to the production run. The standard chassis remained, but gone were the roof, doors and much of the cabin to be replaced with an insect-like one-piece body, cycle-winged open wheels, motorbike-style instruments and mirrors, and translucent side panels through which you could see the road rush by.

Any Elise is a feast for the senses, but the 340R brings sensory overload. Every control is that bit more responsive, every input exaggerated, every sound and smell accentuated by the exposed driving position. Yet the chassis still feels barely extended – no wonder, a stretched version of the same unit managed to tame a 6-litre LT5 Corvette V8 engine in the short-lived 1997 GT1 racer. It also feels decidedly more acute than a

standard Elise: for acute read twitchy, it's clear that the 340R was not designed to pander to less experienced drivers.

Weight was down to 675kg, power up to 177bhp (or an optional 190bhp), which meant 262bhp per tonne. Two-up it feels a touch faster than the 111S, but shed your passenger and performance is staggering: 60mph arrives after just 4.6 secs and the noise from the Janspeed exhaust each time the fourth gearshift light flickers atop the Stack instruments is incredible, banishing any lingering memories that the K-series also powered coffin-dodger specials such as the Metro and Rover 200. The brakes, too, benefit from the 340R's diet: with so little weight on board Lotus could drop a rear disc size and still offer stopping power to take your breath away. Despite the knowledge that the tyres and spring rates come from the track-biased Sport 190, fast cornering initially requires faith because the 340R is so light that you fear a gust of wind would flick you off the apex and into the hedge.

Where the 340R is almost a caricature of a sports car, the Exige is deadly serious. Its Group C racer in miniature looks are no mistake, because the fixed-head Exige was a direct descendant of the Elise's transfer to the track for the Sport Elise racer, an extreme variant developed by Lotus Motorsport for the one-make Autobot Lotus Championship. Gone were the

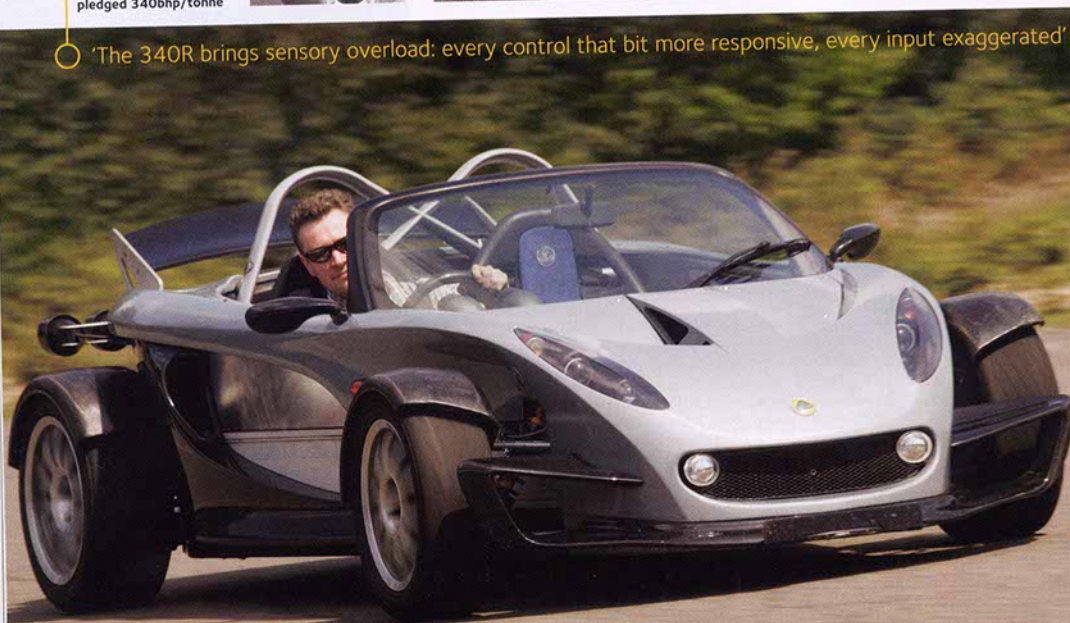
standard car's friendly face and pert rump, replaced with muscular flared arches, a Kamm tail and a full aero kit including front splitter and raised rear wing. Peppered with vents and intakes, it hit the road in 2000, taking its name from the French for 'demand' and losing the racer's central driving position in the process.

Clamber through the awkward door aperture – there's no removable hood to aid entry in the fixed-head Exige – strap yourself into the harnesses and it only serves to build anticipation. Turn the key and the eruption from just behind your ears sounds like a 340R being run inside a biscuit tin, with a hunting idle and snappy throttle response. Like the 340R, the Exige was offered in 177bhp or, as here, 190bhp VHPD

As if it wasn't sliced and diced enough, the aftermarket carbon fibre steering wheel in this already bulimic 675kg 340R saves a further 1kg. The most lightweight Elise of all has a wild sweeping dash and Aprilia wing mirrors. The project still fell short of the pledged 340bhp/tonne



○ 'The 340R brings sensory overload: every control that bit more responsive, every input exaggerated'

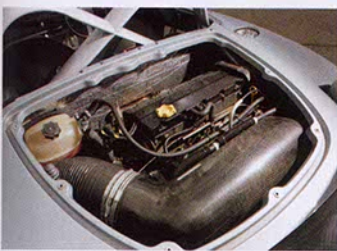




'Turn the key on an Exige and there is an eruption from behind your ears'



The Exige is exactly what it looks like – a road legal race car. Built primarily for the track, it is surprisingly usable on the road, though rear visibility is woeful. Only let-down in the Exige package is an indistinct 'rubbery' gearchange where rifle-bolt precision might be expected



tune, with peak power arriving at a heady 7800rpm, just 200rpm shy of the rev limiter.

The Exige is cumbersome at first – steering more physical, tyres and brakes wooden when cold – but a few miles under its brooding black alloys bring a revelation: it may not look as wild, but this is the most extreme Elise. Once the heat gets into the Yokohama Advan AO39 tyres, grip is extraordinary and you soon begin to trust the additional downforce – an extra 80kg at 100mph – that helps this variant corner harder and faster than any other. The steering is higher-geared at 2.3 turns lock-to-lock and loads up significantly when turned into a long sweeper, but it brings bags of feel and the confidence to keep squeezing the throttle that bit more. It may not carry show-stopping power figures, but this car is one of the most involving of the past 20 years.

Whether it's the purity of the original, the extreme 340R or the race-derived Exige, a member of the Elise family should be on every enthusiast's shopping list. At today's prices there's plenty of room in a lottery winner's budget for all four... and we're talking about a decent scratch-card win rather than a Saturday rollover.

So which is best? As is so often the case original is purest, but my winnings would be poured into an Exige, to turn every round trip to the shops into a lap of La Sarthe. And in 30 years' time, it's not hard to imagine Elises being discovered in *C&SC's Lost & Found* pages, restored in back-street lock-ups and enjoyed for what they are: the benchmark of a generation. ■

TURN THE PAGE TO MEET THE OWNERS
AND SEE FULL SPECS OF THEIR CARS

BUYING AN ELISE? READ THIS!

- 1 The Elise chassis is critical and, if damaged, should be replaced. Look for mismatched or deteriorating glues and any sign of welding or silver paint concealing repairs to the tub.
- 2 Small bodywork imperfections are inevitable, but watch for poor colour match as a sign of accident damage. The nose is prone to damage, especially on an Exige; front and rear clamshells can be replaced, but not cheaply.
- 3 K-series head gaskets can fail so make the usual checks. More highly stressed units can be fragile: expect 190 VHPD motors to need a rebuild every 40,000 miles: watch for rattles, blue smoke or metallic deposits in the oil.
- 4 Rear subframes can corrode, or buckle in crashes – look for cracks around the rear wishbone mounts. Clonking suspension suggests worn anti-roll bar mounts, sloppiness could be worn bushes and dampers.
- 5 Most Elises have some modifications and have been used on track. This needn't be a problem, but look for signs of abuse and bear in mind that factory mods have less negative affect on values than non-approved accessories.

CLUB CONTACTS

Club Lotus 01362 694459/691144;
www.clublotus.co.uk
SELOC PO Box 4257, Hornchurch, Essex,
RM11 3YE; www.seloc.org
Lotus Drivers' Club 01525 875316;
www.lotusdriversclub.org
Lotus Club International 01953 608817;
www.lotuscarswebstore.co.uk

FIND OUT MORE

Elise: Rebirth of the True Lotus Alastair Clements, Haynes, ISBN 1 85960 857 4
Lotus Elise: The Official Story Continues Jeremy Walton, Coterie, ISBN 1 902351 15 0
The Lotus Elise and derivatives: an Enthusiast's Guide and Pictorial Review Paul Robinshaw, ISBN 0 9528086 4 1
Lotus Elise: The Complete Story John Tipler, Crowood, ISBN 1 86126 213 2

David Whalley
LOTUS 340R

A bargain was hard to resist for David Whalley: "The last owner bought it to do the Cannonball Run but pranged it before the start. My ex had an S1 which I thought was fantastic, so when I saw this for sale I jumped at it. It has everything that's great about the Elise, but with more extreme performance and handling." Yet the 340R has competition in Whalley's garage: "I've been into 'bikes since I was 17 plus I've got an E-type 3.8 coupé that I'm restoring. I've done about 4000 miles in two years in the Lotus including a couple of airfield days." Whalley finds that the no-frills approach of the 340R appeals to the 'biker' in him: "I'm told that Lotus held a focus group with 'bikers when they were styling the 340R and I know a few owners who were 'bikers – it's the only thing I've driven on the road that comes near motorcycle acceleration."

Toni Ashwood
LOTUS ELISE 1.8i

"This is my first Lotus, but I come from a family of Lotus fans," says Toni Ashwood. "It was love at first sight with the Elise." After an XR3i and a Lancia Delta HF that "went to the great rust-heap in the sky", Ashwood came across her Inferno red Elise by accident: "I wanted a yellow one, and set up a test drive with a silver car so I wouldn't be tempted – then they arrived in this and I knew it was the one." The Elise has suffered head gasket failure, but Ashwood rates independent specialists: "They've lent me wheels off their cars when I've had punctures. There's a huge social side to Elise ownership – I met my baby's dad on a club run." Not that Ashwood is about to let motherhood get in the way: "I've found a baby seat that fits and a pram that goes in the boot. It would break my heart to part with it – we'll be buried together!"

'There's quicker stuff out there, but not that's more fun. It's a car for life: I want to be the crazy old man who goes to the shops in an Elise'

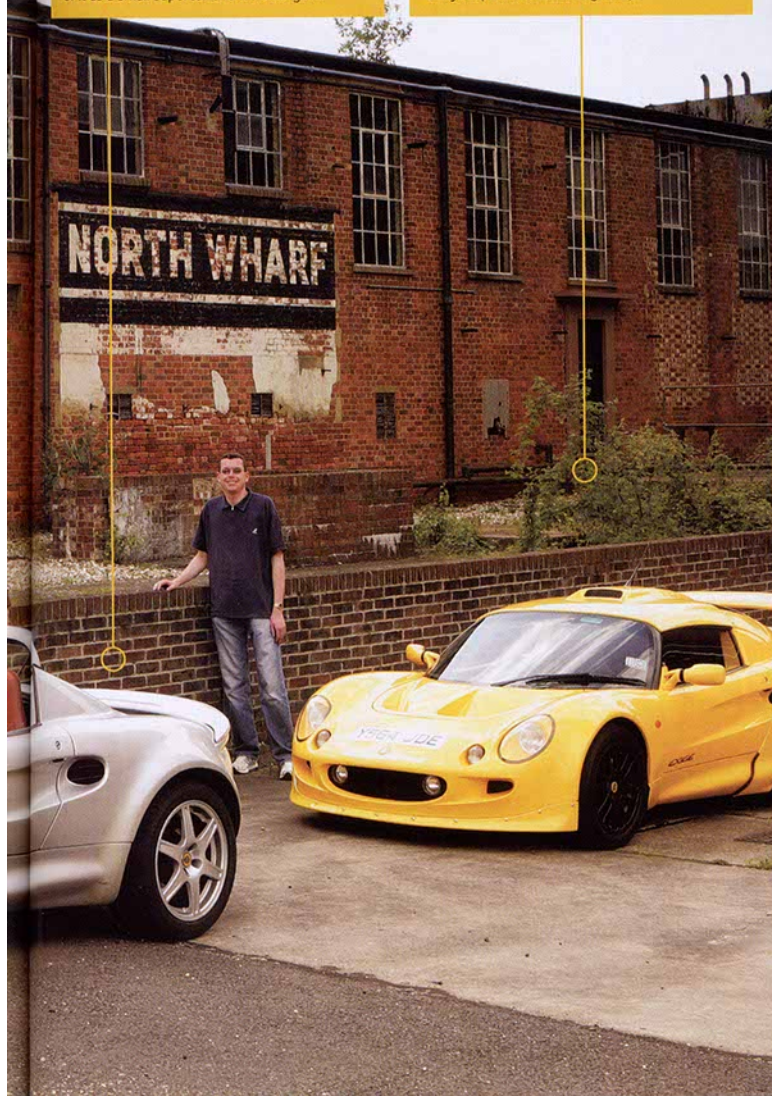


Andy Rowe
LOTUS ELISE 111S

"I've always wanted a Caterham, but the Elise offered the best of both: fab handling and you can use it every day," says Andy Rowe, whose 111S replaced an MR2 Turbo two years ago. "The standard Elise was too slow: the VVC engine and close-ratio 'box make a big difference. There's quicker stuff out there, but not much that's more fun. It's a car for life: I want to be the crazy old man who goes to the shops in an Elise!" Rowe has "let it breathe" with induction kit and Janspeed exhaust: "When the dampers die I'll give it Lotus Sport suspension, but I'm more into improving my skills than the car. The beauty is that you can use it for track days and it doesn't put much pressure on the car – if you don't bin it you can drive to work on Monday. It's costlier to run than a GTi, but think of it as a small supercar and it's a bargain."

Peter Field
LOTUS EXIGE

Peter Field's Exige is only his fourth car: "I didn't know what I wanted until I drove an Elise and fell in love with Lotus. Then I drove an Exige and was smitten: I love its individuality and it's so raw and exciting – it plays with your senses." Field isn't worried by the lack of practicality: "I'm single with no kids – it doesn't matter that I can't get anything in the boot. I have great roads on my doorstep so it gets used every weekend. When it's really wet the tyres are tricky." Field's car has also hit the track: "I've done a few circuit days with Midlands Lotus Owners' Club and it's awesome. At 100mph it feels like it's sucking down to the road." Independent workshops get a big thumbs up: "They put themselves out when I have a problem. Hi-Tec Motorsport and Tardebigge Bodyshop have been a huge help."



LOTUS ELISE 1.8i

Sold/number built 1996–2001/8613
Construction riveted and bonded extruded aluminium perimeter chassis with GRP panels
Engine transverse, mid-mounted, water-cooled all-alloy double overhead-cam 1796cc Rover K-series in-line four with four valves per cylinder and MEMS multi-point fuel injection
Max power 118bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 122lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission cable-operated five-speed manual transaxle, driving rear wheels
Suspension independent all round by double wishbones and coil springs over monotube dampers; front anti-roll bar
Steering rack and pinion, 2.7 turns lock-to-lock
Brakes 11in (282mm) ventilated ceramic/aluminium composite discs
Length 12ft 1½in (3726mm)
Width 5ft 11½in (1820mm)
Height 3ft 11½in (1202mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6½in (2300mm)
Front track 4ft 8½in (1440mm)
Rear track 4ft 9½in (1453mm)
Weight 1594lb (723kg)
Wheels & tyres 15in (front) and 16in (rear) alloys with 185/55 (f) and 205/50 (r) tyres
0–60mph 5.5 secs **0–100mph** 17.4 secs
Top speed 124mph **Mpg** 28.7
Price new £18,950 **Price now** £8–14,000

LOTUS ELISE 111S (where different)

Sold/number built 1998–2001/1489
Engine as 1.8i, with variable valve timing
Max power 143bhp @ 7000rpm
Max torque 128lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission as 1.8i, with close-ratio gears
Brakes ventilated and cross-drilled iron discs
Weight 1698lb (770kg)
Wheels & tyres 225/45 (r) tyres
0–60mph 5.6 secs **0–100mph** 11.7 secs
Top speed 130mph **Mpg** 30.7
Price new £26,590 **Price now** £9–15,000

LOTUS 340R (where different to 1.8i)

Sold/number built 2000/340
Engine as 1.8i, with multi-point fuel injection and Lotus engine management
Max power 177bhp @ 7800rpm
Max torque 126lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission as 111S
Brakes 11in (282mm) front, 9½in (245mm) rear ventilated and cross-drilled cast-iron discs
Length 11ft 10½in (3620mm) **Width** 5ft 5in (1655mm) **Height** 3ft 8in (1123mm)
Weight 1488lb (675kg)
Wheels & tyres 195/50 (f), 225/45 (r) tyres
0–60mph 4.6 secs **0–100mph** 12.5 secs
Top speed 132mph **Mpg** 25.8
Price new £35,000 **Price now** £15–25,000

LOTUS EXIGE (where different to 1.8i)

Sold/number built 2000–01/583
Engine as 340R
Max power 190bhp @ 7800rpm
Max torque 126lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission as 111S
Steering 2.3 turns lock-to-lock
Brakes as 111S
Length 12ft 5in (3780mm)
Width 5ft 7½in (1720mm)
Height 3ft 10½in (1175mm)
Weight 1731lb (785kg)
Wheels & tyres as 340R
0–60mph 4.9 secs **0–100mph** 13.1 secs
Top speed 124mph **Mpg** 22.1
Price new £29,995 **Price now** £15–25,000