

FirstDrive

Lotus bridges the ge

Fancy a fast *and* comfortable sports car? The latest Lotus Elise should please girls and boys of all ages, say **Helen Mound** and **Brett Fraser**

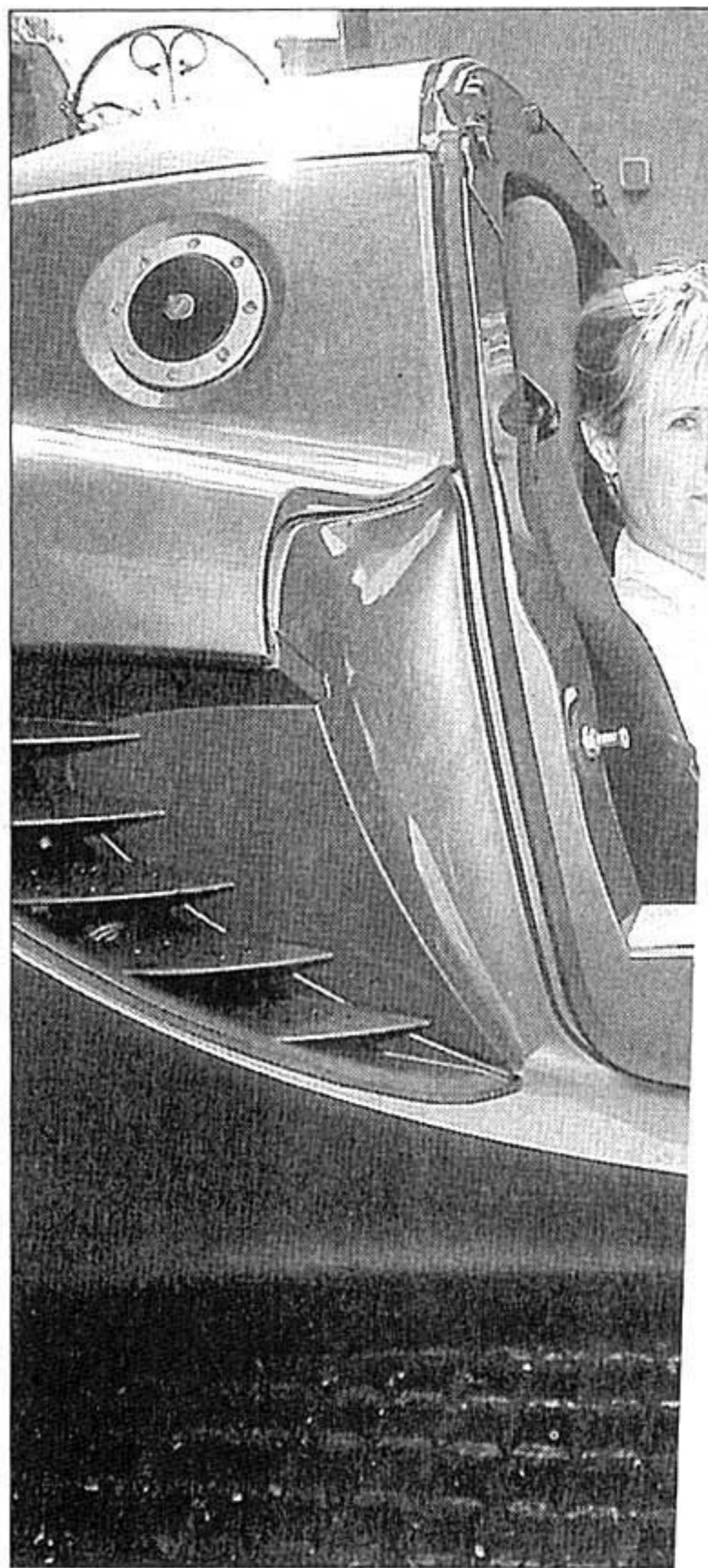
The Lotus Elise? Not very butch for a sports car. The first version looked a bit girlie; it even had a girl's name. And yet it didn't become a favourite with the girls. It was never lumbered with the "hairdresser's car" tag that handicapped models such as the first MGF and it was terrific to drive, which endeared it to the boys.

Did the lads' overwhelming keenness put women off? Was the Elise's no-compromise design – bare metal surfaces, no carpets, no electric goodies and a hood of hideous complexity – unappealing to a gender that demands a few luxuries? Or was it simply that the little Lotus was a cow to get in and out of? Whatever the reason, only four per cent of Mki Elise buyers were women.

It seems we girls like the second-generation car rather more, for the percentage of female buyers now scrapes into double figures. Suitably encouraged by this development (prompted, ironically, by a revised body style that was rather less feminine), Lotus hopes to reel in more lady buyers with a new derivative, the 111S. In fact Lotus hopes this latest model will tickle the fancy of both sexes, because not only does it have more power than the standard car – 156bhp compared with 120bhp – it is much more lavishly equipped, with carpets, sound-insulation, leather upholstery, a CD player and even the option of air-conditioning. More refined with quieter and more comfortable cruising capabilities, the enthusiasts' roadster has thus been born again as a real car for sensible people.

Indeed Lotus has discovered that while Elise owners applaud the noble concept of a no-frills, frightfully fun sports car, they choose an average of 10 options when it comes to ordering one of their own. And while these folk were still hunting around for the roadster of their dreams, they often flirted with the Porsche Boxster, the BMW Z3 and even the Audi TT. The way Lotus saw it, to go on stealing sales from comfy choices such as these, the Elise had to grow up, or at least wear grown-up clothes and behave itself in polite company.

That's where the 111S (pronounced either "Triple-one S" or "One-eleven S", depending on who at Lotus you talk to) comes into the equation. Although it's actually the most powerful production Elise, it's also the most lavishly equipped, the closest yet to the sub-£30,000 sports car norm. Spartan minimalism in the cabin is replaced with designer chic and the whole thing looks more smartly conventional. The stark, aluminium-alloy floor is now



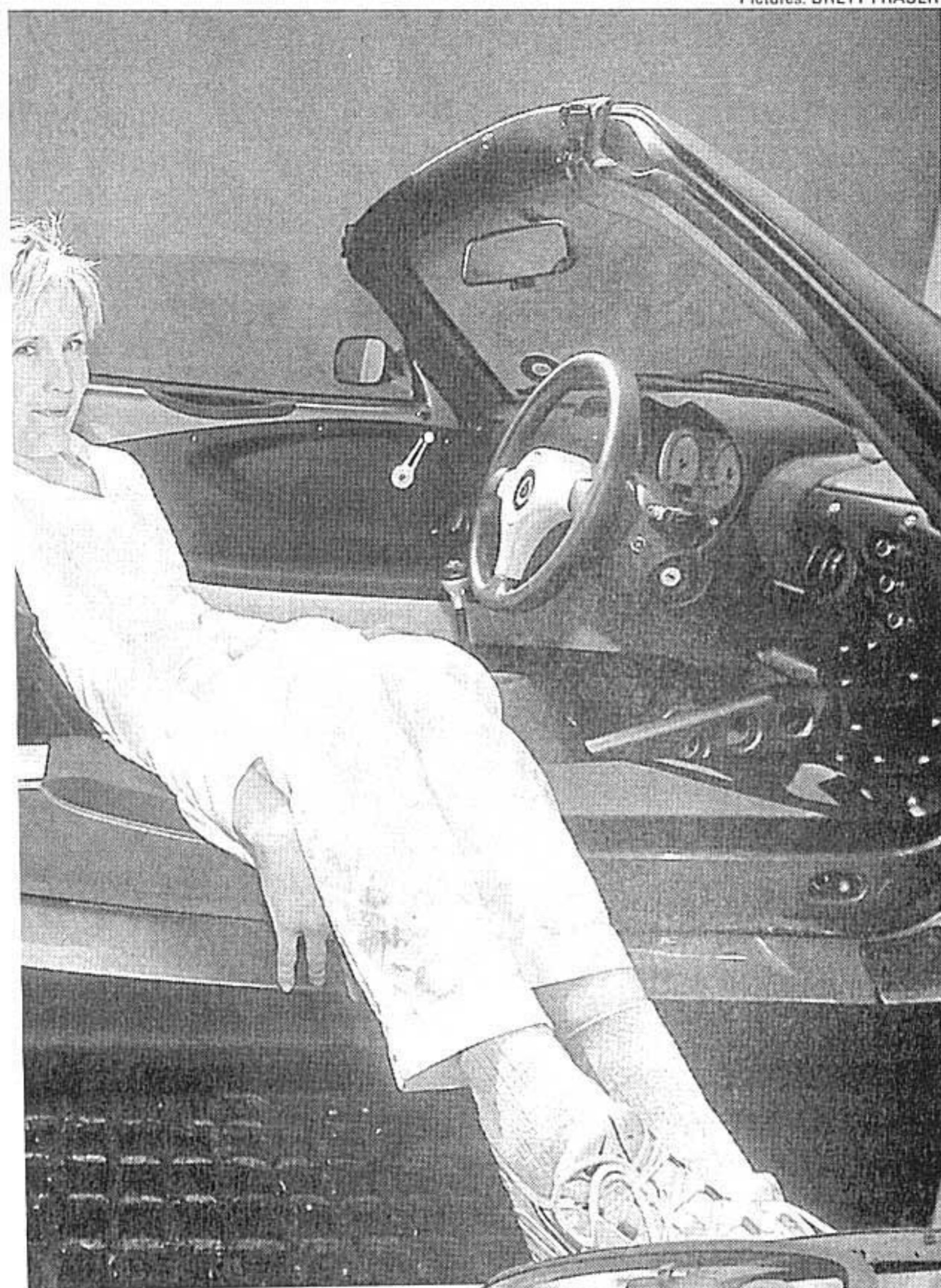
Girl power: Lotus thinks the new Elise will appeal to

covered by foam-backed carpet mats, the upholstery – including the door trim – is now leather, the seats have more lumbar support and the stereo has been upgraded to give louder sounds and the facility to play CDs. You might almost call it lavish, in a Ferrari-esque sort of way, and it certainly makes the new Elise feel far more special than its predecessors did.

Happily, you don't lose the sense of being in a proper sports car – getting in and out with modesty while wearing a short skirt still requires a very disciplined togetherness of knees and ankles. You sit low and snug, clutching a gorgeously

ender gap

Pictures: BRETT FRASER



more women. It worked for Helen...



Lotus Elise 111S

Price/availability: £27,995 (£25,995 for less well-equipped 111). On sale now.

Engine/transmission: 1,798cc, in-line four-cylinder, 16 valves, DOHC, variable valve timing and lift; 156bhp at 7,000rpm, 129lb ft of torque at 4,650rpm. Five-speed manual transmission, rear-wheel drive.

Performance: top speed 131mph, 0-60mph in 5.1sec, EC Urban fuel consumption 30.0mpg, CO₂ emissions 163g/km.

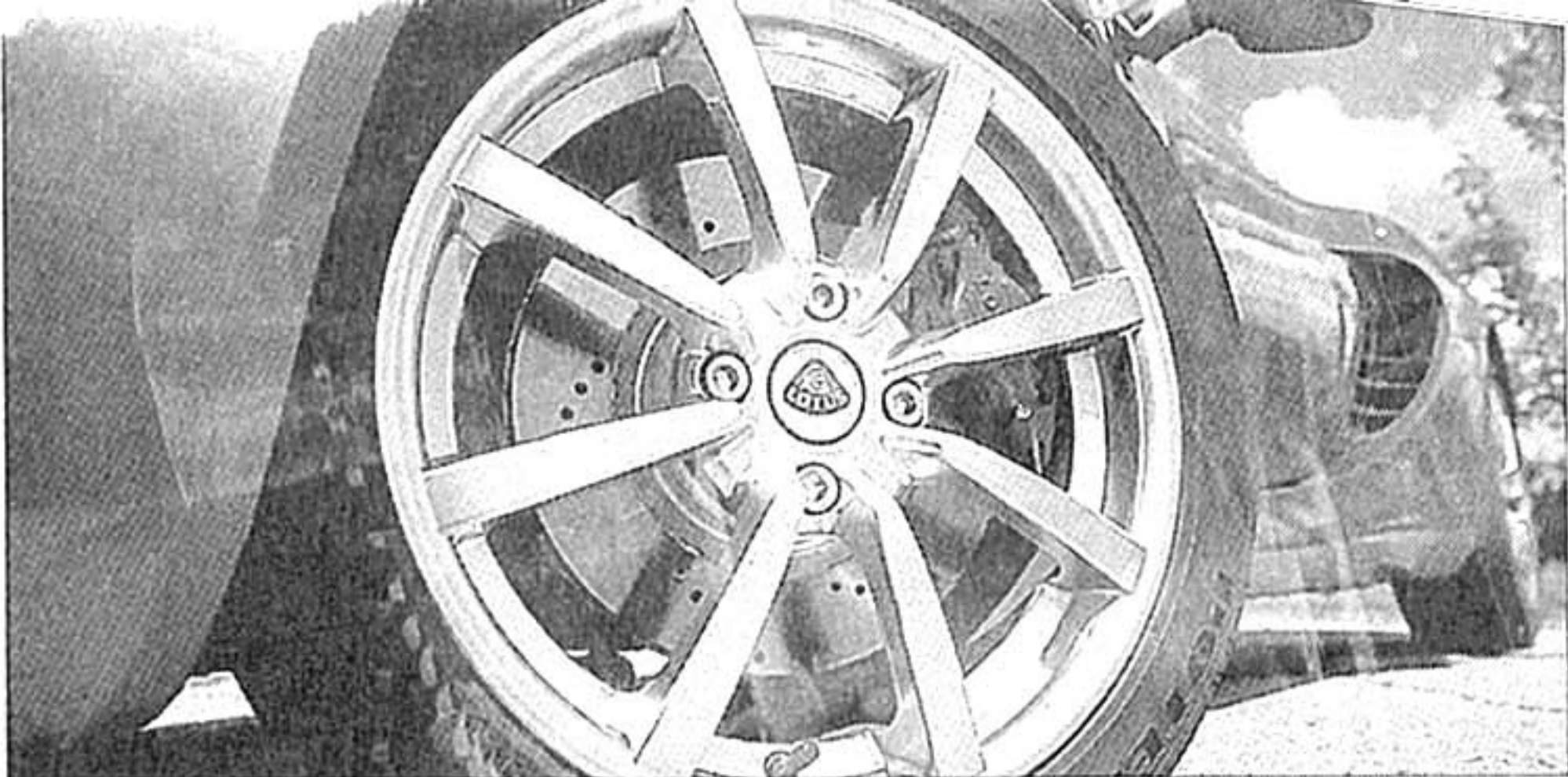
Worth considering: Audi TT Convertible 225bhp, from £29,000. BMW Z3 3.0 Sport, from £27,730. Porsche Boxster 2.7, from £31,450.

small steering wheel, and the gearlever and pedals are nicely positioned for smooth, swift operation. The new hood arrangement is certainly less of a fiddle than the old one – although if the rain catches you out, getting it up in time to keep the cabin dry remains a stern test of speed and dexterity.

From my point of view, the driving experience has been greatly enhanced. Obviously having more horsepower helps, but it's the fact that you no longer have to thrash the car along to make brisk progress that really appeals. That and the more relaxed top gear, which reduces the din of motorway cruising. The handling, of course, is as wonderful as ever.

Until now (while dreaming of having the money), I've always thought of myself as a Boxster kinda gal. But the refining of the Elise could well refigure my wish list.

Helen Mound



Power to your right foot

Since the launch of the second-generation Elise, everyone's been wondering why Lotus didn't introduce a more powerful engine in order to realise the full potential of the little roadster's remarkable chassis. Now Lotus has done just that, in the form of the VVC version of MG-Rover's 1.8-litre K-series engine.

It hasn't been a simple operation, however. Lotus has developed its own engine management system for the K-series unit, a long and costly process and a feat that nobody outside MG-Rover has yet achieved. It has also modified the inlet system and the exhaust; the latter has a

special flap inside to change the exhaust note to something more inspiring at high revs while remaining respectably hushed around town.

With power up from the standard Elise's 120bhp to 156bhp, the 111S (and its less well equipped kin, the 111) now rips from standstill to 60mph in 5.1 seconds and gets to 100mph in 14.1 seconds, which is pretty impressive stuff for a car with such a small and not especially powerful engine.

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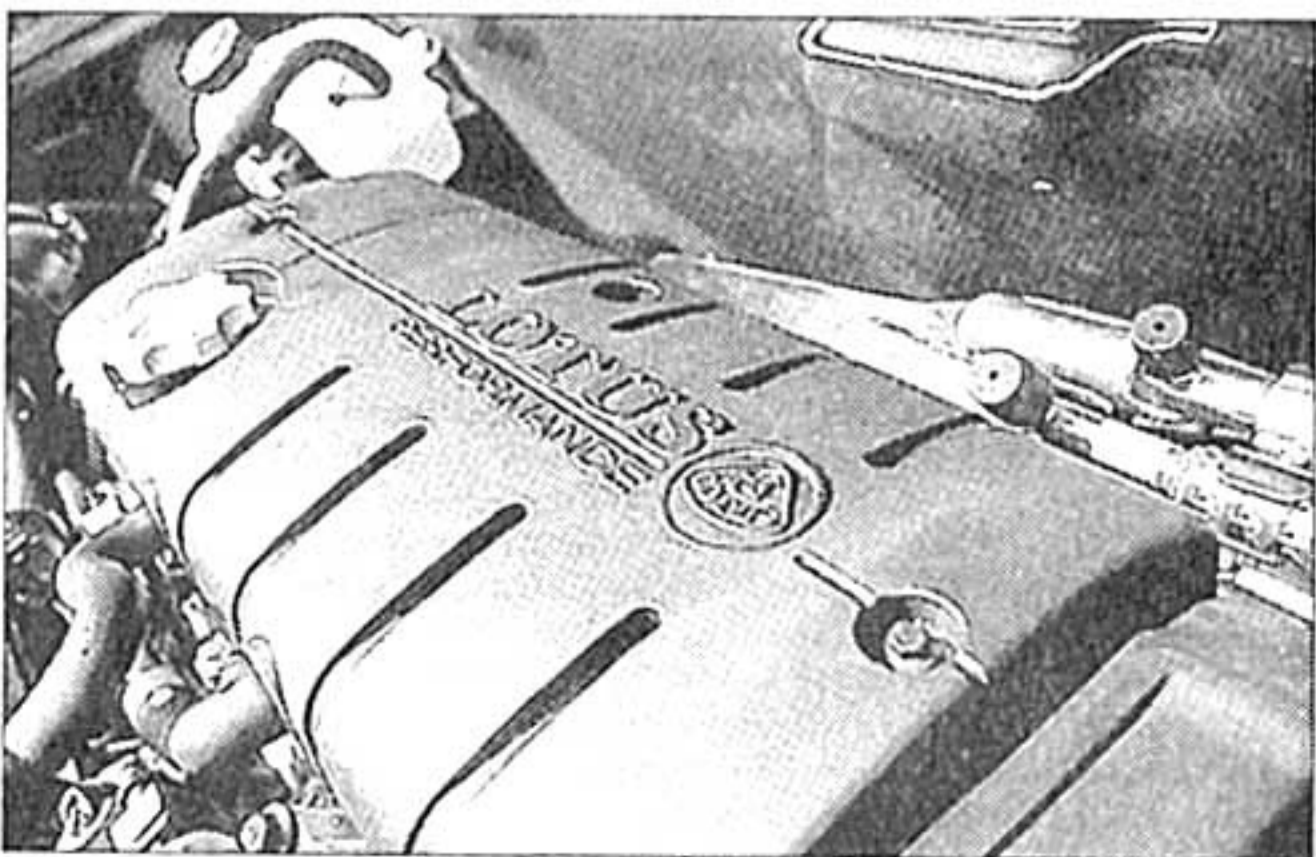
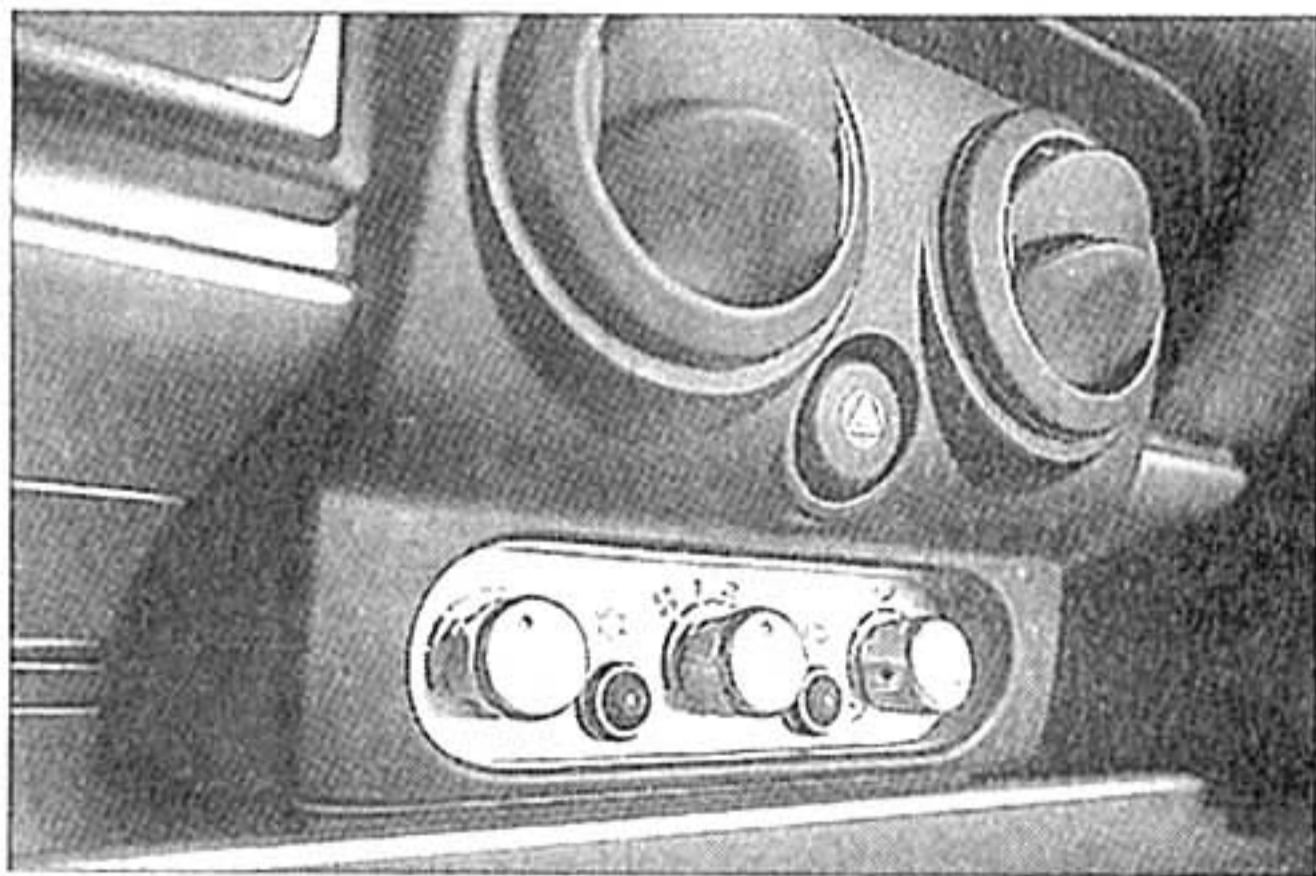
To start with, however, the 111S doesn't feel madly quicker than the standard Elise. Then you begin to realise that your ground speed is incredibly high and you're using nothing like the full spread of revs available.

One of the reasons Lotus went to the trouble of developing its very own management system for the engine was so that it could structure the torque delivery to give 90 per cent of its maximum across 70 per cent of the useable rev range, which is why you don't have to try too hard.

With its better appointed interior, more robust torque package and quieter cruising ability – thanks in part to a longer top gear, plus extra sound-deadening material in the cabin – the Elise 111S seems more mature, more mainstream. Not too common or garden, though, especially if you rev it hard to open up that flap in the exhaust and let it howl.

And the handling remains extraordinary. No changes have been made to the chassis because, as we always suspected, the standard item can easily handle more power. Actually there is one change: superb-looking new wheels that are 5kg a set lighter than previously. The 111S can also be identified by a revised rear end treatment, and is the first Elise to benefit from a revised hood arrangement, aimed at making it slightly less irksome to use and more watertight.

If you've previously thought an Elise a little too specialist for your needs, now might be a good time to go have another test drive; the quicker, more mature 111S could change your mind.



All change: superb-looking new wheels are 5kg a set lighter, top. Air-conditioning and a new engine boost comfort and power

Brett Fraser