

Life in the old Cat yet

by Stephen Day



Waaaaaaa Waaaaaaa Waaaaaaa Brrrrr lubble lubble lubble...the sad sound of the end of a tired crossflow at Curborough in March 2000.

Frustrated? Yes, it was the first run of the day...after the winter's break. Confused? Yes, what to do now...repair, replace...retire?

I run a well campaigned live-axle seven of 1984 vintage that has seen a long and successful competition history in the hands of Andy Crockett and mostly Peter Shaw – appearing on the front row of a Lotus event at Le Mans and winning the Midland Hillclimb Championship. Powered by a trusty crossflow, it had been developed and tweaked over the years but Curborough that day was just one sprint too far! The head gave up the ghost in a crescendo of pops, bangs and expletives.

Common sense would demand that the crossflow was repaired, the car sold and I move on to a shiny new toy. Hmmm...Common sense and

Caterhams...ne'er the twain shall meet...I remember Alex Wong writing something to describe the effect that the seven bug can have when it bites. Owners will quickly recognise the symptoms, you develop an almost illogical bond and this passion can take you beyond the bounds of reason.

This was the case for me and, never being one for an easy life, I was tempted by the lure of a lighter and, potentially, more potent K series engine. I had always hankered after a Superlight and knew I could get hold of a very good donor Rover K series. With the thought in mind that this might be a way to build a 'virtual' Superlight, I began the task of assessing how to install it. Now, as anyone who knows me will vouch, I am not technical and seriously struggle to tell my torque wrench from my circlip extractor, but I

was convinced that the engine would fit. With encouragement from my seven guru Nigel (Keats), I pursued the idea with Caterham and another midland dealer. Their response was interesting..."very difficult"... "won't fit easily" ... "what's the point?" Buoyed by their enthusiasm we decided to go ahead anyway.

The aim was to make the engine flexible but not too peaky. My passion is hillclimbing and sprinting and we felt that a torquey, smooth power band would be the best way to optimise my times at events.

The K series was purchased and, even though it was new, it was stripped and fully rebuilt. Those of you who have read Rob Walker's article in the January 2001 issue of Low Flying or have visited Dave Andrew's website will get the gist...we planned to port and polish the head,

install the big valves, the direct to head throttle bodies...etc. As Rob said, there have been innumerable articles regarding the K series and how to tune it, so I won't bore you here other than to say that if you do plan to build or enhance your K series, visit the website. The amount of useful FREE advice available is staggering! I haven't met Dave yet but I know many K-series fans who have and, to them, Dave is 'God'!

We chose to use the DTA ignition system as this simplified the wiring loom installation and seemed to provide the best match to the QED cams. So, while we were waiting for various bits to arrive we measured up for the straightforward task of installing the engine (and the obligatory Caterham six speed box)...mmm...bugger...it doesn't fit...damn damn damn...hang on, actually, it does...

In fact it seemed that the engine would squeeze in without any chassis modifications, but with some perseverance Nigel adapted the tunnel and gearbox support bar, altered a couple of minor front chassis crossmembers to emulate the later cars and enable easier access. He also adapted and made the engine mounts...voila! It fits!

We also needed to fabricate a different tunnel and gearlever aperture and needed some jiggery pokery to be able to fit the very large trumpets and ITG air filter. This was a bit of a fiddle, (but worth it for the noise alone!). The new tunnel that Nigel fabricated supports my left arm in exactly the right position with the gearlever perfectly placed.

The engine build went smoothly (apart from a few unexpected hiccups caused by QED sending a variety of wrong parts – Vauxhall cams, incorrect bearings and piston rings). However, to be fair to QED they were very helpful, although the glitches really delayed the rebuild.

So it was that I collected the 'finished' car (a few cosmetics were outstanding) on Monday 19th June 2000. With a full day at the Prescott Hillclimb Drivers School booked on the Wednesday and a round of the HSA championship also at Prescott the same weekend, I had some serious running in to do! I duly did this, trolling around Warwickshire lanes and 'carefully' driving the car at the school, racking up a couple of hundred sensible miles before the







weekend. Come Sunday and the event I had still not really blasted the car, although I did give it a few meaningful squirts on the way to Prescott.

I knew the car would be quite quick as it felt very responsive, but I had no real idea of exactly what to expect. Those of you who have been to Prescott will know that the first corner (Orchard) is a fast left-hander that needs to be approached with some commitment...

Well, the green light comes on ...hold the revs...GO!...waaaaa and I nearly forgot to turn into the corner I was smiling that much! The kick in the back was huge and the sound was glorious. At the end of the event I was delighted to finish third in the HSA class and only 0.4 behind the winner. More importantly I had achieved mine and the car's best times at Prescott, with the distinct feeling there was more to come.

There were a few more events running up to the Club sprint at Curborough in August I found at MIRA that I needed to install an inline fuel filter – without one the gunk in the tank seized the fuel pump (!). We also had to install a swirl pot to avoid fuel starvation on long corners.

The club sprint was frustrating...I was competing against several fast guys and Nick Potter ran out the winner in a new record time. As it happens, my practice



would have won the class but never mind – I learned an important lesson about sprinting that day – ensure the car is in gear BEFORE the red light turns to green. I forgot this basic rule and triggered the timer. Morgan Cleasby said in his review that I must have got up to some mischief on the circuit...if only!

I was determined to give Nick a better run for his money at the 2001 sprint, especially as we have become good pals and, like many competitors, we enjoy the unique camaraderie that exists in club sprinting. Nick had reset the record in May and so it was all to play for, especially as it seemed he had the edge in practise. However, I managed to put in a smooth drive on my first proper timed run and this was good enough to beat Nick and set a new record. A great feeling and so nice to

do it in the 'old' girl.

To sum up. Was it worth it? In pure financial terms probably not. I guess I could have bought a new superlight for the same sort of money. But, in reality, 'upgrade-itis' would soon have set in and I would have been into modifying the car. The real truth is that it is great to be able to compete with the latest cars on the circuits and I don't feel that the live axle is a handicap in this environment.

If you have an old cross flow, then we have proved that you can install a K-series successfully. It works and it is fun. With regards to the future of my car? Well next up on the list of 'things to do' is to fit wide track front suspension, big brakes, rear disks and upgrade the original shocks, as they are some way past their best!

